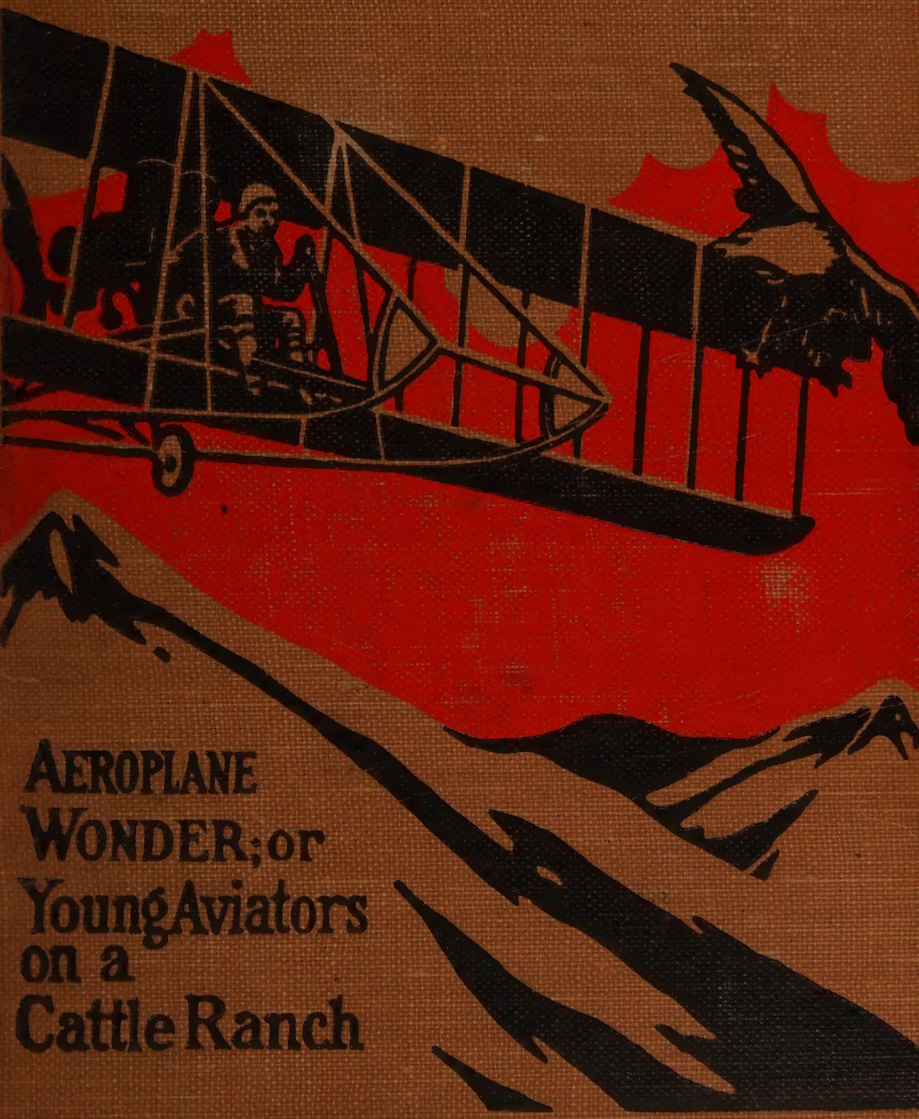
THE BIRD BOYS



AEROPLANE WONDER; or Young Aviators on a Cattle Ranch

JOHN LUTHER LANGWORTHY

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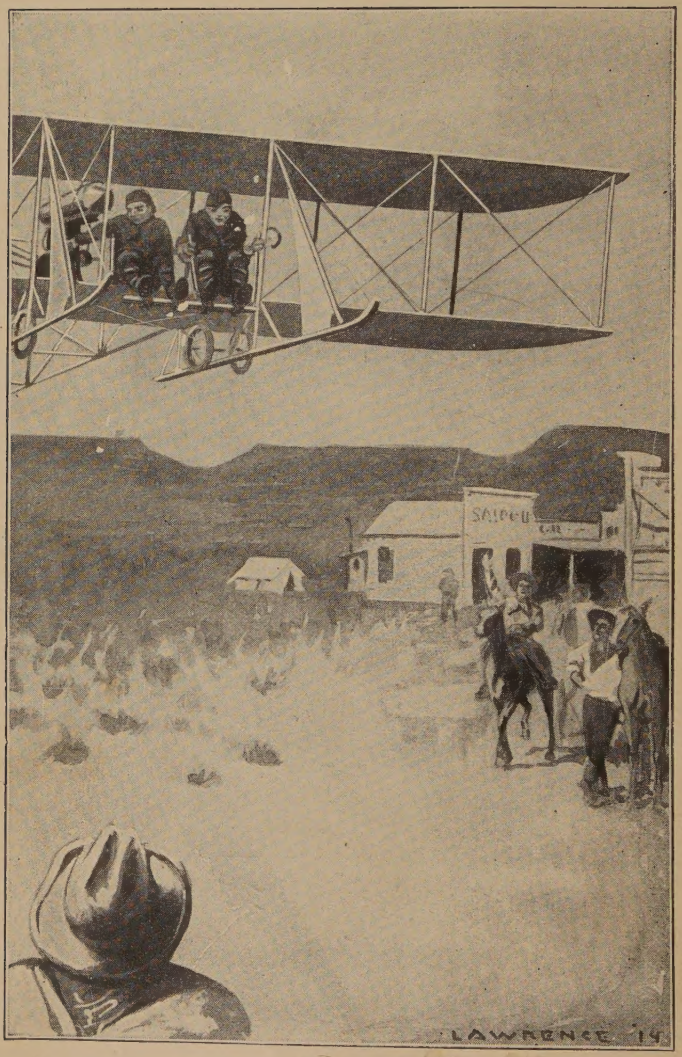
A Merry Christmas
to
Loraynd Phillips

1930



JUDGE OF THEIR ASTONISHMENT AND [illegible]EY
SAW THE AEROPLANE LEAVE THE EARTH.

(Chapter VIII.) (Bird Boys' Aeroplane Wonder.)

THE BIRD BOYS' AEROPLANE WONDER

Or

Young Aviators On a Cattle Ranch

By
JOHN LUTHER LANGWORHTY

Chicago
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Made in U. S. A.

The

Bird Boys' Aeroplane Wonder

Or, Young Aviators On a Cattle Ranch

CHAPTER I

UNDER THE SPREADING BEECH

"Was there ever such great luck, fellows?"

"Whew! for one, I feel like giving a vote of thanks to the striking masons, who loafed pretty much all summer, and held the repair work on the Bloomsbury High building up till now."

"Them's my sentiments, Elephant!"

"And they say now the work can't be finished and school taken up till December! What d'ye think of that, Frank, and you, Larry?"

"Glory to goodness! two extra months' vacation, and right through October too, when the chestnuts are ripe, and walnuts are dropping! What bully days we've got ahead of us, boys!"

"And November, too, mind you," went on the little "runt" who had been called "Elephant" in a joke by his chums and could not shake off the name, "the month when the frisky cottontail is also ripe. Say, Frank, won't you have

a ge-lorious time trying out that new Marlin pump-gun you got for your last birthday?"

The third member of the group sitting under the beech tree had as yet not spoken, since his two companions started to give expression to their extravagant delight over the wonderful news brought by Fennimore Cooper Small, the aforesaid "Elephant," whose father happened to be the head Selectman of the town, and could fetch the decision of the Board of School Trustees home before the rest of the worthy citizens had been put wise to the facts.

"Well," said Frank Bird, with one of his rare smiles that always made him friends wherever he went, "I had a pretty good idea it would end that way, when I heard how the trustees failed to find any building in town that would answer to house the high school pupils. Yes, I'm glad for some things, and sorry for others. But it'll give the Bird boys a chance to do a little more flying before winter sets in and stops all that fun."

Frank and his cousin Andy had become quite famous throughout the region around Bloomsbury, a town in Central New York, on account of the wonderful success they had made of aviation.

Indeed, some of the doings of the Bird Boys,

as they were called, had even found their way into the columns of the big metropolitan papers, and among professional birdmen they were looked upon as most promising "comers."

Back of Frank's house—where he lived with his father, Professor Bird, once a noted balloonist and scientist, together with an old gentleman who had served as guardian to Frank when his father was believed to have perished on one of his long flights while exploring parts of the Panama Isthmus—in a field some distance in the rear of his house there had been built a fine workshop, where the two boys spent most of their time when not in the air.

Already they had invented quite a few ingenious contrivances which gave promise that some day their names would figure along with those that have made aviation in heavier-than-air machines what it is today—those of the Wright brothers.

Close to this workshop was the great "hangar" in which they kept their aeroplane when it was not in use; and since enemies had frequently tried to injure their property these buildings were not only securely locked but as a rule watched of nights.

To tell even a small portion of the doings of these bold cousins when navigating the air

would consume too much space and time; and the reader who has been unfortunate enough not to have enjoyed their perusal is referred back to the previous volumes in this Series, where they will be found recorded at length, and the story told in an entertaining manner.

The third member of the little group taking it easy under the wide spreading beech tree, with its thick branches, was one Larry Geohegan, a firm friend of the Bird boys; whose only fault was the envy he often felt because he could never accompany either of his flying chums aloft, being afflicted with a weakness that made him dizzy whenever he looked down from any height.

Elephant had met the other two quite by accident on the road, and stopped to communicate the grand news, which he had heard his father tell at the breakfast table.

Apparently the other two lads were going fishing, for they had poles and bait cans lying on the ground. There was a beautiful lake named Sunrise, upon which the town lay; and a mile away a stream ran into this which could always be depended upon to furnish a splendid string of bass, chubs, sunfish and horned pouts or catfish, when the wind was favorable, as happened on this lovely morning.

"What were you waiting here for under this tree; did you expect Andy to show up?" asked Elephant after he had declared his intention of joining the fishing party, and cutting a pole when he got on the grounds.

"Just what we did," replied Frank. "He spent last night out at Spencer's, because as you all know, the old gentleman is especially fond of Andy, and every once in so often begs him to come out and cheer him up."

"Yes, and they do say he means to leave all he's got to Andy, in trust of his father, Doctor Bird," declared Larry, that little streak of envy again making itself evident in his voice; for it did seem to him that things were always coming to his chums and passing him by.

"Oh! that's silly talk," laughed Frank, "I wouldn't pay any attention to it, if I were you, Larry. I'm sure Andy never gives such a thing a thought. He's only too glad to oblige the poor old man who's so crippled with rheumatism that he can hardly hobble around. And you know that years and years ago he used to be a noted traveler, and a lecturer as well. Why, fellows, there hasn't hardly been a country on the face of the earth that Mr. Spencer hasn't visited, and explored. I could

sit for hours and just hear him tell about what he's seen and gone through with. I try to go out with Andy every chance I get; but last night I was too busy with a knotty problem I had to solve."

"I just bet you it was about some new contraption you're making up to surprise the flying people. Already you've done a heap along that line, Frank; and they do say that the time is sure to come when you'll give the Wrights, and all that bunch, a rude jolt, by inventing something that they've all been trying hard to discover, but nixey, nothing doing up to date; because the time ain't ripe, and the Bird boys haven't had a fair chance to show what they can do."

Frank only laughed when Elephant applied this thick coat of flattery. He was accustomed to hearing this sort of talk from that quarter; because the Small boy had always been one of his greatest admirers from the time when he and Andy were struggling with their first rude pattern of an aeroplane, in which they had installed some sort of cranky engine, and actually taken short flights, without getting their necks or legs broken.

"But you must have agreed to meet Andy here then, didn't you?" Elephant went on to

remark, stretching his neck to glance along the road as he spoke.

"That was the agreement when he went off on his wheel yesterday afternoon," replied Frank Bird. "If the morning looked fishy, Larry and myself were to wait here under the old beech at eight o'clock until he came along. You see, I've got a pole for him; and we dug lots of worms. Larry even went out last night with a lantern, and picked up a can of big fat night-walkers that look like young snakes. I dropped in at Andy's house on the way here, and told them he wouldn't be back till evening, if the fish took good, and the bathing turned out fine. We've also got plenty of grub along; yes, enough for you, too, Elephant."

"Hoop-la! you make me feel happy when you say that, Frank; because I was born with an appetite, you must know; and when I can't get my grub at least three times per diem I'm apt to complain," and the Small boy grinned good-naturedly as he made this remark.

"I say, Frank, have you and Andy invested that reward money the bank insisted on you accepting when you captured the two hobo yeggmen who broke into their safe; and also stole Percy Carberry's biplane to make their get-away in?" asked Larry, who, it might as

well be confessed right here, had a pretty average streak of curiosity in his make-up, and was forever wanting to know this, that, and the other thing.

"Oh!" answered the other carelessly, "we've still got that in bank, and may put it into another machine later on; or else invest in some parts we want to work with, Andy having a new idea this time that looks worth while experimenting with."

"You sure are the luckiest pair I ever ran up against, and that's a fact!" declared Larry.

"We think so ourselves," Frank admitted. "There's one thing certain, and that is we don't deserve all the great times we've been having this year and more."

"Don't you believe it!" exclaimed Elephant. "It ain't luck so much as being everlastingly at it, and minding how you do things. You deserve all you've got, Frank; and lots of people say so besides me."

"Here comes Andy," remarked Larry, anxious to turn the conversation just then, for he was really somewhat ashamed of his weakness, I saw him flash past that open place up the road, and spinning along like fun."

"Yes, you're right there, Larry," added Frank, "and here he is."

A boy mounted on a fine bicycle came whirling along the road, and speedily drew up at the beech with the dense foliage, which later on would yield a harvest of the small but sweet nuts boys love so well when it is a "fat" season.

Andy Bird was not quite as tall as his cousin, though well built and rather stocky at that. There was more or less resemblance between them, although their temperaments differed in many ways, Andy being more inclined to impulsiveness than the cooler and far-seeing Frank. But they were exceedingly fond of each other, and had been inseparable for years.

Andy threw himself from his saddle, and lowering his wheel to the ground after the usual boyish way, dropped down beside the others.

"Whew! I hit it up at a lively clip all the way down!" he remarked. "You see, it's awful hard to break away from Mr. Spencer, and he kept me up to the last minute. I knew you said eight o'clock, Frank, and I didn't want to keep you waiting. Glad you turned up, Elephant; we tried to get you on the phone yesterday afternoon; but they said you'd gone off, and nobody knew where. Going with us, ain't you?"

"Make your mind easy on that, Andy,"

replied the diminutive Elephant, glibly. "I never could hold out when there was any fishing going on. I just revel in pulling out the gamey bass, the festive catfish, and the acrobatic eel; while as for perch and pickerel and sunfish, why, I delight to see them wriggling on the hook, ready to take their places in the pan. See you've got a fryingpan along, Larry; and that means we'll have fish for dinner today—after we grab 'em out of the water."

"But Andy think of the bully good news Elephant's gone and brought with him," Larry went on to say, jubilantly, "the trustees have finally decided that, as the big repairs on the high school building have been started, and can't possibly be done till early winter, why, because there's no place in town that could be used just now, vacation has got to be lengthened until about the first of December."

Andy Bird looked delighted, as what boy would not. Immediately his eyes traveled in the direction of his cousin, and there was exchanged between them a significant series of nods and winks, that possibly meant their thoughts were along the same lines; and that now they would have the time to go with certain work that had been taking their attention of late.

"By the way," said Frank, "I stopped at your house on the way out, Andy, to tell your father that you would go fishing with us, and not to expect you till night. And he gave me a letter for you that he said had come in the early morning mail. From the postmark I see it's from your uncle Jethro, away down on that Arizona ranch you were telling me about. Here it is, and a fine fat one too."

Andy hastily opened the letter, and was heard to give vent to a low cry that seemed to spell both astonishment and delight.

"What's this mean?" exclaimed Frank, stooping to pick up a paper that had fallen to the ground, "why, as sure as you live, it's a check made out to you, Andy, and signed by the old bachelor uncle, your mother's brother. Hold your breath, fellows, while I whisper what the amount is he takes pleasure in sending to his beloved nephew—four figures in it, as sure as you live—a clean thousand dollars!"

Larry gave a groan and threw up his hands while his eyes rolled.

"Of all the lucky fellows, you Bird boys do certain sure take the cake!" he cried.

CHAPTER II

GLORIOUS NEWS

"Ain't you going to read it out, Andy?" asked Elephant, anxiously.

"Wait till he gets through, can't you?" asked Larry, although he was fairly trembling with eagerness to hear what the sending of that glorious check could mean; when he looked at the small bit of paper Frank was holding he almost held his breath with awe, for to tell the truth Larry had never seen a check a quarter as large as that in all his life.

Andy could not say a word when he finished reading. He seemed to be fairly overpowered with emotion, and holding the letter out to Frank, motioned that he should accommodate the other two.

And so Frank started in. The letter was written in a cramped hand, as if uncle Jethro Witherspoon had rather lost the knack of using a pen; but then Frank could wade through it, even if he did hestitate here and there.

It started in after this fashion:

"My Dear Nephew, Andrew Bird:—I've been hearing a whole lot about the way you and your cousin Frank are coming along with that

airship business, and your mother has got me worked up to pretty nigh fever pitch about your precious doing. Now here I am, an old and cranky bachelor, with a big and successful cattle ranch on my hands, and no chick or child to cheer me up. I want you two boys to pay me a long visit, and bring that wonder of an aeroplane along with you. I sounded your mother some time back, without her letting you know, and she was agreeable, if only it could be arranged without interfering with your school duties. And here today your good dad, the doctor, has wired me that he believes there is going to be an extension of the vacation period for another two months.

"Seems like things might be working to please a lonely old man out this way. Now here's a little check to cover expenses. If you need any more draw on me to any amount. What's money for anyway but to give pleasure to somebody? Pack up that flying machine of yours, and either tuck it under your arm or else ship it by the fastest express you can get to receive it, regardless of cost.

"I'm not going to take no for an answer. I want you and that smart cousin Frank down here to show some of my cow-punchers what's doing in the line of this flying business. But

most of all I want to see you. I've got your pictures before me as I write, and I'm counting the days until you arrive, bag and baggage. Wire me on receipt of this all about your plans and when you can start. If you say you can't come, I'm going up after you. I'm used to having my own way, the boys down here will tell you. With lots of love, believe me,

"Your affectionate uncle,

"JETHRO WITHERSPOON."

When Frank finished reading this remarkable letter, Larry gasped for breath; while little Elephant stood on his hands and cracked his heels together.

"That sure takes the cake, Andy, Frank!" he declared, when he had once more resumed his customary position, with his head higher than his heels. "And my stars! what a gelorious time you two will have of it, away down in that desert corner of Arizona! Cowboys—bucking bronchos—whirling ropes—branding cattle—the merry round-up—the camp-outs on the plains, and all them stunts. Oh! what wouldn't I give to be going along with you, fellers?"

"It's always better to be born lucky than rich; I've said that before, and I'm ready to stick by it!" stoutly asserted Larry.

"Frank, can we go, do you think?" asked Andy, almost in a whisper, as though he had hardly as yet recovered his breath, taken away at the wonderful news contained in that letter which his cousin had brought him.

"We'll think it over and see," replied the other, always avoiding the rush tactics that Andy frequently displayed, and which made him a valued member of the Bloomsbury High football eleven. "But I rather guess it could be arranged, if my father is willing."

"Huh! no danger of him saying no," grunted Larry. "He ought to know that you two boys can take care of yourselves anywhere on the face of the earth. After you went down to Colombia in South America, and figured out where he must have drifted to, when he lost control of his balloon; afterwards rescuing him from that queer old valley surrounded by the high cliffs, that made him a prisoner, the Professor'd say yes if you wanted to try a trip to the moon. And some of us'd believe you, if you said you'd been that far in your airship, and shook hands with the Old Man up there."

"But he wants us to take our aeroplane along, Frank; could we pack that up and send it by express, do you think? Will they take anything as big and cumbersome as that, in

boxes or crates, by express?" Andy went on, eagerly, as though in his mind the fact of their going was already assured.

"I guess they'll take anything short of a house!" declared Elephant. "Even if it needs a special car to carry it along. If you sent the thing by freight, chances are it'd be a whole month getting there."

"And time counts with Uncle Jethro more than money does with most men," remarked Larry. "You see he wants to get you there with your flier regardless of expense. Why, I'd wire him tonight, Andy, and pack up in a couple of days. Elephant 'nd me'll help out all we can."

"Well, I should say we'd thank you for the chance," spoke up the Small boy.

"It's hard to believe we've got such a great chance to see something of that country down there among the mountains and deserts and plains of Arizona," Andy went on to say, as though he wanted some one to stick him with a pin, so as to find out whether he were really awake, or only dreaming.

"And I never dreamed we'd have such a great opening to visit that country," the other Bird boy went on to say, while his face beamed with delight which refused to be repressed.

"That uncle of yours must be a fine old chap, Andy. His letter is a peach, and I'm as sure as anything we'll like him from the word go. Think of his throwing you a check for a thousand just like it might be thirty cents; and telling you to draw on him to any amount. He must think we'll be wanting to charter a special train to take us and the aeroplane along."

"Chances are he'd stand for it," ventured Larry. "Say, why didn't some rich old uncle of mine think of me, and send a little piece of paper this way? I've got half a dozen wealthy ones, but they don't know I'm on the face of the earth."

"Well," said Elephant, "get busy then, and make the name of Geohegan famous, and then they'll all break their necks trying to get you to let 'em adopt you. The trouble is, Larry, you hide your light under a bushel too much. Fly high, like the Bird boys do, and everybody 'll see what you are."

The other gave a dismal groan.

"That's just what ails me," he complained, "I can't fly at all. Why, I get dizzy in a swing; and even when I go out on the lake, if she's the least bit rough, you'll find me hangin' over the side right away, tryin' to see how deep it is, and wonderin' if drowning'd stop my

troubles easy like. I reckon I'll just have to make up my mind that if ever I set this old world afire, it's got to be by doin' some stupendous intellectual stunt. That seems to be my long hold, just as eatin's yours, Elephant."

"Rats," jeered the other, contemptuously, "as if you couldn't stow away twice as much as me any day you felt like it. I talk a heap about the grub racket; but you can work them jaws of yours to beat the band, Larry Geohegan."

"Well, do we start off now, or fuss around and chatter like a lot of monkeys?" demanded the party thus referred to by Elephant.

"What about your wheel, Andy; you don't want to lug that along through the timber by that snaky trail?" asked Frank.

"I had fixed all that in my mind as I pedalled," was the reply. "You know we have to pass the Fletcher place just above here, before we strike off the road, and I can leave the bike there till we come out this afternoon."

"Sure thing!" commented Elephant, nodding his head sagely; just as though when he approved of a suggestion it had the hall mark of wisdom stamped on it.

"I've done that more'n once when I had my wheel along," declared Larry, bent on showing

his chums that he could have an original idea once in a while, even though fame had not picked him out for a favorite.

"Did you bring a pole along for me, Frank?" asked Andy.

"Yes, and plenty of hooks, and lines, and sinkers, and what-not," replied the one addressed. "Elephant, here, says he'll cut a pole after we get on the ground; and the chances are he'll be the luckiest fisherman of the lot. nearly always turns out that way, I notice; for the fellow who just takes things as they come along gets the biggest fish and the greatest number. Now, you see, I've got a rod along, a real jointed split bamboo rod that was given to me last Christmas by my guardian, old Colonel Whympers. I'm going to be the toney angler, and try all sorts of stunts while the rest of you are pulling in the fish. But to me a pound bass caught on light tackle is better than one that weighs three times as heavy, if I have to just yank him in with a pole, and a cord tied to the end—no reel, no fine leader, only a hook in a bunch of wiggling worms, and a float above the sinker."

"Huh! you're getting big notions, Frank," grunted Larry. "Time was when you seemed just as well pleased with one of these long cane

poles. I'm mighty much afraid you're getting spoiled, my boy."

"Well, if somebody made you a present of a beautiful jointed rod like that, now, Larry——" began Andy.

"Ain't no chance for that to happen; nobody ever thinks to remember my birthday, 'cept you fellers; when you pound me nearly to death, and then treat to the ice cream to make up for it," Larry lamented, dolefully.

"But supposing they did," persisted Andy, who never liked to give up anything on which he had started; "now, wouldn't you want to get acquainted with it; and if you caught a good fish that way, and felt how he pulled, and saw the slender rod bend nearly double, wouldn't you want to try it again and again, honest Injun, Larry tell me?"

"Oh! I guess so, Andy," answered the other, making a grimace, "but there ain't no such luck for me. I must a been born under an evil star, my mom says, because I'm always bustin' things at home. She says it's because I'm so clumsy; but I know better. Why, seems like some things just fall over and smash, when I happen to look at 'em."

"Then for goodness sake quit looking at me like that, Larry!" exclaimed Elephant. "I

ain't got no hoops around me right now, and I tell you I don't want to bust any—not till after we've had that bully old camp dinner today, anyhow. Just turn your eyes the other way, thank you."

Andy had meanwhile carefully placed the wonderful check inside the envelope once more, and with a pin fastened the latter in his coat pocket. It was Frank's suggestion that he do this; for the latter knew from experience that Andy could be a bit careless at times. And the thought of losing that windfall, when so delightful a future beckoned to them through its means, would be enough to give any boy the heart-ache.

"All ready, boys?" asked Frank, presently, as he stooped and carefully picked up the little covered case in which his fine rod lay, each joint reposing in the groove that was made to hold it.

"Yep. Let me carry the poles, Larry. You-'re always getting things caught in the bushes and trees as we go along. Why, only the last time we came fishin' didn't you hook me in the ear, and make me howl like anything? You take care of that fryingpan, and the bundle of grub. And walk ahead, so's we c'n kinder keep an eye on you, please, Larry."

"Huh! think you're smart to say that, don't

you, Elephant?" grunted the other, but in spite of the fact that these two were usually in some sort of a "spat," they were really great friends, and ready to do almost anything, one for the other.

So the four boys left the shelter of the fine old beech that stood alongside the road, while its mates grew over on the other fence; for strangely enough, Frank had noticed that beech trees like company, and are rarely if ever, found alone.

They walked briskly along the road, with their backs turned in the direction of the not far distant town. A little ways off they would climb the fence, pass through a field, enter the woods, and by a short-cut reach the fishing grounds much more easily than if they had skirted the lake, and coming to the little river, followed up its sinuous course.

Just as they came to the bend a short ways above, Larry, who was ahead, happening to turn around in order to say something was seen to stare, and then exclaim:

"Well, now, if that don't beat anything going!"

Of course his strange words, together with the look on his face, aroused the curiosity of the other three boys. They, too, turned their

heads, thinking in this fashion to discover what had given Larry so great a shock; but so far as they could see, there was nothing at all in sight.

"What was it?" demanded Andy.

"Did you see somebody?" demanded Elephant, getting his poles in every sort of trouble, in his eagerness to learn what it was all about back there.

"Yes, and what do you think, fellows, he just dropped down out of the branches of that big birch tree, and hurried into the bushes like fun. Take my word for it, he must a-been up there all the time we was sittin' talking; and if that's so, he learned about Andy here getting that letter and check from Uncle Kethro, 'way down in the cow-puncher country."

"But who in the mischief was it, Larry, did you know him?" persisted Elephant.

"I should say yes; and who but that sneak of a Sandy Hollingshead, the shadow that hangs around after Percy Carberry, and does most of his mean work for him. And chances are, he's makin' for town right now, to tell all he's learned. Say, won't your old rival, Percy, be mad, though, when he hears of the luck that has come to the Bird boys?"

CHAPTER III

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

Andy looked somewhat serious when Larry said this; but Frank on his part only laughed.

"Well, what does it matter?" he remarked. "The thing will be town talk in a little while, and those fellows would hear it that way. Let Sandy run with his great news and give his chum a pain. You don't think for a minute that because we've got a chance to go off there to the cattle country, that Percy Carberry would make up his mind to hike that way, with some sort of machine he's got coming, to take the place of that new biplane the bank thieves wrecked for him in Lake Ontario?"

"But you know how bitter he's always been against us, Frank?" expostulated Andy. "Many's the time he's tried to do us a bad turn; and even up in the air he used to take the greatest delight in swooping past us, just as close as he dared, and give us a scare; though he quit that when you threatened to lick him."

"But didn't you do Perc a great favor that time he had his machine knocked to flinders on the table rock up yonder?" demanded Elephant, turning to point his rods upwards to

where quite a mountain reared its head toward the clouds, and which was locally known as Old Thunder-Top, though in the atlas it had another name.

Nobody had ever been able to climb to the summit of that precipitous height, and when the Bird boys landed there once from their aeroplane and planted a flag above the nest of the white-headed eagles they achieved a great triumph. The incident to which Elephant alluded had been brought about during a sudden thunder storm that had caught the rival aeroplanes while making a flight to the top of the mountain; and at that time the Bird boys were indeed placed in a position to save the lives of Percy Carberry and his comrade Sandy; but since gratitude was a foreign element in the make-up of the jealous rival, he had never shown that he meant to change his tactics toward Frank and Andy.

"Oh! never mind about what we did," remarked Frank. "Forget it, just as Percy has done. Tomorrow, we'll get as busy as beavers, packing the machine in the cases; and how lucky we didn't break them up as you wanted to do, Andy, just to get rid of the stuff, you said. I guess we ought to be able to ship on the next day, and then learn just how long it'll be on

the way, so we can time our own going."

"Huh! seems to me you ain't botherin' much about whether your dad'll give his consent, eh, Frank?" remarked Larry, grinning.

"Oh! I'm taking that for granted; because you all seemed so sure he wouldn't refuse me that favor," chuckled Frank. "But come along, boys; what do we care if Sandy did get the news first hand, by climbing that tree when he saw us coming along the road, and keeping those big ears of his wide open. So far as I'm concerned I'd just as soon tell them myself all about our plans; because if we're away down in Arizona, and they stay here in old Bloomsbury, I don't think Percy's got a long enough arm to reach that far, and do us any harm."

"He sure would if he could, and don't you forget it," muttered Elephant; and at that Andy looked more or less troubled.

As our story concerns the doings of the Bird boys in other fields than that of their old stamping grounds around the home town, we need not accompany them further on their visit to the fishing hole. Enough to state that the finny tribes bit eagerly at times, and that besides having a fish dinner at noon, they all carried home respectable strings to exhibit as

evidence of their prowess with hook and line.

Frank doubtless felt satisfied with his sport, even though he did not take the largest bass, nor the greatest number for that matter; and the whole of them came home by sundown, tired, yet satisfied with the day's sport.

During the many hours spent alongside the deep hole where the fish loved to lie in these late summer days, there was plenty of time in which to discuss the coming departure of Frank and Andy for the Far West. And it can be set down as certain that the subject was threshed as dry as a bone before the quartette separated for the night.

Early the next day Elephant and Larry showed up at Frank's house, to find him already busily at work out there at the hangar, taking off bolts, and dismembering the wonderful aeroplane with the confidence of one who was familiar with every minute detail of its construction; which was only the truth, for with his cousin he had partly built at least three "fliers" up to now, and was continually thinking up some new arrangement that would make the task of piloting aeroplanes through the upper air currents much easier, or possibly add to their safety when rocked by furious gusts of wind among the clouds.

Andy soon showed up, and almost quivering with eagerness to get busy. There did not seem to be the slightest thing in sight to disturb the two who were planning such great things.

And that was indeed a busy morning for the four friends.

Elephant and Larry were only too anxious to do all that lay in their power, in order to assist. True, their knowledge of the mechanism connected with these amazing air travelers was rather limited; but then both were willing to do odd jobs of carrying, and nailing up cases; so that altogether they made themselves very useful indeed.

Larry managed to bottle up his envy on this occasion, and even seemed quite gay. As a rule he was a good companion, cheerful, willing, and generous to a degree. And Elephant could hardly have been any happier even though given the opportunity to accompany the pair of adventurous voyagers on their long trip.

Then came the afternoon session, and they went at it with renewed vim. It is astonishing what an amount of solid work four husky boys can put in during a whole day with the tools, especially when two of them are as expert in

handling monkey wrenches and the like as Frank and Andy were.

By four o'clock the aeroplane had been completely and securely packed, and they were waiting for the big truck which Frank had engaged at the livery stable, to show up, in order to carry the same to the freight station of the railroad.

The man presently came along, and with the help of the four boys the various boxes and crates were loaded. Then they started off, headed for the railroad; and as their route lay directly through town it was not long before quite a following of youngsters trailed along, chattering about the mysterious way in which Frank Bird was about to ship his aeroplane, and inventing all sorts of miraculous stories about certain races in which the two cousins were slated to take part; until one boy more daring than his mates, managed to climb up on the truck, and read the address which had been plainly printed on every piece of freight.

So it was known that the aeroplane was being shipped far away to Arizona; and it may be set down as certain that this fact only served to whet the curiosity of that crowd of half-grown lads more than ever.

Frank had learned on the preceding evening

how it would have to be sent out. The express people would handle it after a certain fashion, shipping by what they called fast freight. The agent calculated that in this way it would take about ten or twelve days for the aeroplane to reach the border town where Andy's uncle was to meet them upon their arrival.

Of course that meant a long delay, and much fretting; but it was the best that could be arranged, and Andy had to abide by it. But between them he and Elephant and Larry had decided that they would not let the precious freight go unguarded for a minute, until it was placed in a car on the following morning, and had left Bloomsbury on the freight that would rush it to the nearest city, where it could be attached to the fast train that left daily for Western points.

Frank was inclined to make fun of his cousin for his suspicions, and declared that according to his mind they had nothing to fear, except the possibilities of a fire sweeping down upon the ramshackle freight house, which was the best Bloomsbury could boast until the new stone one was completed.

"Do just whatever you want to, boys," he had remarked, after they had received the receipt for the freight, and paid the charges all

the way through, with some of the cash that wonderful check had been exchanged for after Andy had written his full name across the back; "but I rather think you'll have all your trouble for your pains. As for me, I've got a few important things to work at tonight, and so, if you don't mind, I'll spend the time in the shop. Good luck to you all! Let me know the first thing in the morning if everything's O. K." With that Frank swung around on his heel and strode away.

"How about that, Andy," demanded Larry, when they saw Frank vanish beyond the open door of the freight shed; "is he really giving us the hook because we think it best to watch the blooming freight tonight, for fear that tricky Perc Carberry and his man Friday, I mean Sandy, swoop down upon it, and do something to make your fine airship good only for the scrap-heap?"

Andy laughed as he replied:

"You just don't know Frank as well as I do," he observed. "Chances are that if we hadn't set up that howl about being afraid something was going to happen here, my cousin would have quietly sneaked along this way after dark, and stood on guard the whole blessed night."

"What's that you say, Andy, and he just laughed at us too? I didn't think Frank had it in him to play a joke like that," exclaimed Elephant, looking hurt.

"Well," went on Andy Bird, "you see he knew we were bent on keeping guard here, and Frank does hate to see anybody disappointed; so he just let us have our own way about it. And then when he said he had something important to do at our shop, he spoke the truth; because he's right now on the heels of a discovery that may mean a whole lot to us."

"All right," remarked Larry. "We're only too glad to let Frank off, and run the whole shooting match ourselves, for once. Now, how shall we fix it so every fellow can get home to supper, and yet keep tab on what's going on here all the while?"

This was very easily adjusted, however. They left Larry on guard, because he said his folks had supper later than the rest; and both Elephant and Andy promised to hurry back as soon as they could get enough to eat; and let their folks know just why they did not expect to occupy their beds that night.

This plan worked all right.

When the two boys turned up together, one having called for the other, of course the first

thing they asked Larry was whether anything had happened; perhaps their sharp eyes detected the fact that he looked somewhat excited, and they judged that this could hardly be unless he had seen something suspicious.

"Well," remarked Larry, with his favorite drawl, "I kept myself hid just as nice as you please, and I was glad I'd been so smart; because who should walk in here talking to the agent but Perc himself. Seemed to be asking if any freight had come along for him, and made out to be pretty huffy over the delay of the railroad to deliver stuff. Got the agent to hustle around, looking to see whether it could a-been overlooked, and hidden out of sight behind other things. But say, when he was sure the other's back was turned, what did Perc do but step up to your stuff, Andy, and take a quick look at the directions you marked on each package. Then I heard him chuckle, step back, and measure distances with his eye; just like a feller might do that expected to come back here in the dark and prowl around and wanted to get his bearings well in his head!"

"Wow! now what d'ye think of that?" exclaimed Elephant, showing his white teeth aggressively, and doubling up his diminutive fist; for, although unusually small in stature,

he was a spirited lad; just as the little bantam rooster seems ready to fight a big Plymouth Rock, or a Shanghai, for that matter, if the opportunity offers, and he feels that his dignity has been affronted.

Andy nodded his head, and looked rather pleased.

"Let'em come," he said, "it won't be the first time I've lain in wait, expecting a sneaking night visit from Percy Carberry and some of his crowd. And history has a way of repeating itself; so in that case he's going to be in for a mighty unpleasant experience, or my name isn't Andy Bird."

The boys had thought fit to approach the agent, and tell him that since there was no way of locking up the heavy freight that lay around under that shed; and they had reason to fear that an attempt would be made to injure the crated aeroplane, they meant to watch throughout the night. Of course, he had not the slightest objection to offer. The company would be liable to damages should any occur, but that would prove but sorry compensation to the Bird boys for the loss of their aeroplane; since such a catastrophe was apt to prevent them from accepting the warm invitation of Uncle Jethro in far-away Arizona.

And after night set in the three sentries arranged matters to suit the plans of Andy, who had figured out a little scheme which he believed would cover the ground, and not only warn them when intruders started to lay hostile hands on the freight, but play havoc with their mean plans.

The time passed slowly, and it must have been very near midnight when they heard the first indication that prowlers were about. The hanging door at the end of the old freight shed squeaked somewhat when moved; and this sound came plainly to the ears of Andy and his two chums.

They touched each other, as if to give warning, and to make sure that no one of the guardians of the boxed aeroplanes could by any possibility be asleep. Then they got themselves ready to meet the intruders with a little surprise that was calculated to give them more or less of a shock.

And as the three friends crouched there behind the boxes which they had moved in position for this very same purpose, they heard low faint whispering sounds that seemed to be gradually drawing closer and closer, as though those who groped their way in the dark might

be comparing notes, and thus deciding whether they were moving along the right track.

It looked as though the crisis might be very near; and that in perhaps another minute they would be compelled to throw off the mask and give the skulkers the surprise of their lives.

CHAPTER IV

THE PANIC THAT CAME TO PASS

"H'st! flash that light a little!"

These low words were plainly heard by the two concealed boys. They came immediately after there had been some sort of head-on collision between a couple of the prowlers, which had resulted in grunts, and a plain unmistakable groan.

Immediately a little shaft of bright light began moving this way and that. Some one carried a very small edition of an electric flash-light. It gave only an apology for a glow, and yet by moving this to the right and to the left, it would be possible to discover obstructions, and thus avoid any further collisions.

Besides this, the eager searching eyes of the intruders would be apt to discover the boxed aeroplane, for undoubtedly Percy was one of the lot, and he must have marked the whereabouts of the freight pretty accurately in his mind, at the time he wandered around with the agent, pretending to search for his own stuff.

"I see it!" some one said, in a satisfied tone.

"Then for goodness sake show us," grumbled

another fellow, who was possibly rubbing an injured head or arm as he spoke.

"This way, everybody; and get ready to do what I say!"

That must surely be Percy Carberry talking, though neither Andy nor Elephant, nor yet Larry, could recognize the voice, which seemed strangely muffled. But the closer they examined the three approaching figures, slouching along in a half hearted way, as though conscious of the danger that hung over their heads while thus entering upon the property of the railroad, the more convinced Andy and his chums became that they had some sort of muffler fastened across the lower part of their faces, which interfered with their voices.

Perhaps this had been done in the hope and expectation that, if by chance they were discovered while attempting to injure the aeroplane, they might pass for a lot of hobos attempting to pilfer something from the railroad yards that could be sold for enough money to buy liquor.

Andy gave each of his companions a nudge, for Elephant was ranged on one side, while Larry crouched on the other. This was understood to be a signal. It just as much as said, "get ready now, to let go when you hear me

start in!" And both of the others immediately drew in the greatest breath they were capable of containing, according to the capacity of their lungs.

That odd little glow kept wavering around in a queer manner. If Percy were holding the electric torch in his hand he must be trying to show his companions just how things lay, so that they could see how to get to work.

In that moment of intense excitement none of the watchers thought of trying to guess what sort of mischief the prowlers had in view. It was quite enough for them to know that the precious aeroplane was the object of their malicious scheming.

"Are you all on?" demanded a hoarse whisper.

"Yes," came from two other quarters, for the three intruders seemed to have ranged along side the heap of freight in as many different quarters, as though it might be their pre-arranged plan to attack it from various points.

"Then get busy with you, fellows!"

That was of course the last straw on the camel's back. When Andy heard these words, and realized that the attack on the boxed flying machine was about to start in, he could hold back no longer.

"Soak 'em, tigers!"

The words were shouted at the top of his voice; and both Larry and the Small boy joined in the refrain, making all the noise they could possibly bring to bear, according to the amount of wind they had pent up in their lungs.

No doubt the outburst of sound must have struck terror to the hearts of the trio of guilty skulkers, already very nervous on account of their knowledge that they were doing a mean and criminal act. In that minute they probably received one of the greatest shocks of their lives. Detected in wrong-doing their consciences must have stabbed them like sharp-pointed knives; and the possible shameful results of being caught in the act, and held up as awful examples before the rest of the town, gave them a wrench.

But that was not all.

Andy and his companions had made preparations for bombarding the enemy with a shower of stones that were of no mean size. While the scantiness of the illumination might make such a thing as taking aim a difficult task, still, at such close quarters there were sure to be frequent collisions between the rapidly flying missiles and some parts of the bodies of the fleeing boys.

Above the cries of the assailants could be heard the shouts which the retreating skulkers gave vent to, as they fell over unseen packages of freight, banged headlong against walls that seemed strangely out of place, and doubtless accumulated a fine collection of bumps and bruises that would remind them of the adventure for a long time to come.

Of course, as soon as the flight was fully on, Andy and his chums ceased bombarding the panic-stricken enemy, thinking that they had enough troubles of their own in trying to make the partly open door of the shed.

When he went home to supper Andy had secured a little hand torch of his own, and one that possessed considerable more power than that Percy had fetched along. This he now brought into play; and by shooting the shaft of light ahead he was able to discover the three fleeing figures nearing the exit, and sprawling every-which-way, as they met up with obstacles of all sorts.

"Come on, let's capture 'em!" shouted Andy, and with his companions he started as if in hot pursuit, though of course this was meant only as a little additional spur, to add to the alarm of the runners.

When Andy and the other two boys broke

out of the end of the freight shed they could still hear the frightened fellows banging up against things, for the yard was not kept as neatly as it might have been. One flying figure that they gave chase to fell into an open culvert, and though they looked for him, he had evidently crawled far underneath, in his great alarm, for they could not find a trace of the poor wretch, who must have remained there, wet and shivering, for hours, before he mustered up enough courage to crawl out and sneak home.

Another made a headlong plunge over a pile of scrap iron; and though he managed to scramble excitedly to his feet, when he went off it was hopping on one leg a good deal of the way, and with a series of grunts that told how it hurt.

"I guess that's enough, fellows," wheezed Andy, for he was himself so out of breath that he could hardly talk.

The first thing they all did was to bend over, and laugh until their sides really ached. It doubtless looked mighty humorous to the three who had done all the chasing; but those other fellows would have a different story to tell, if asked. But then the old fable is always true, and what is "fun for the boys is death to

the frogs;" no fellow ever plays a practical joke that amuses him highly, but what some one has to pay the bill and do the crying.

So Andy led his army back once more to the interior of the freight shed.

"Let's look to see if they managed to do the first bit of damage," suggested the leader, and quickly adding, "why, looky here what they've gone and left behind 'em—a hatchet, an augur, a chisel, a screw driver—enough tools to stock a carpenter shop. Now, if we knew who owned these, we'd have it on him pretty strong.

But when, in the morning, Andy started an investigation, thinking that the tools might serve to identify the three boys who had entered the railroad freight shed bent on damaging the crated aeroplane, he found that Percy Carberry with his customary shrewdness had looked out for this and covered his tracks deftly.

The tools upon being exhibited were soon claimed by Mr. Mallet, the carpenter, who said that when he reached his shop that morning he found a window had been forced, and quite a quantity of his property carried away. And so it was rendered impossible to indentify the rascals by the abandoned tools.

Of course, had Andy wished to carry the

thing further he might have drawn attention to the fact that Percy Carberry, Sandy Hollingshead, and another boy often seen in their company were absent from their customary haunts that morning; and if interviewed at home would be found to have sundry patches of court plaster adorning their noses and foreheads which would indicate that there must have been an epidemic of falling out of bed on the preceding night. But of course Andy did not mean to pursue the matter any further, believing that "all was well that ended well," and that the boys had already been sufficiently punished.

What he did do immediately after leaving the shed was to call up Frank on the phone at the drug store. Frank did not often oversleep, but being up late on the night before, seemed to cause him to lie abed a little later on this morning. He happened to be eating his breakfast at the time the bell rang; and as the phone was in the diningroom of course he answered it.

"Hello! this you, Frank?" came in a voice he recognized as belonging to Andy.

"Yes, what's all this row about?" answered Frank, humorously.

"Coming down here soon; I'm at the drug-

store close to the station, you know?" the other went on to say.

"What's the matter—anything happen?" demanded the boy at the other end of the wire as if realizing from Andy's manner that there had something occurred that must be out of the common.

"Sure. We had company, and the greatest old time you ever heard of, Frank. Tell you about it when you get here. We're going to breakfast now, and will meet you at the freight shed later to see the stuff packed in the car."

"Hold on. Was there any damage done to our machine?" demanded the other.

"Never a scratch; but it was a close shave. So-long, Frank; see you later!" and having accomplished his object, which was to excite his cousin's curiosity to fever pitch, for it was seldom he had the chance to do such a thing as this, Andy abruptly severed connections and hurried home to get something to eat.

Frank was there all right when Andy got back to the station; and doubtless he had managed to pick up some sort of an account of what had happened; for he seemed to be cross-questioning one of the freight handlers, even while examining the boxed and crated aeroplane.

Of course Andy gave him the whole story; and as both Elephant and Larry had by this time shown up, the four of them laughed again and again, while each of the several witnesses of the panic related their version of the affair, adding such humorous touches as might occur to them.

The boys agreed to let the matter drop, since Percy and his cronies must have been sufficiently punished. Besides, being boys, they were not inclined to be hard on other fellows; even though they felt more or less indignation at the mean way in which Percy Carberry always tried to even his scores.

One thing sure, they meant to hang around that station until the precious aeroplane was not only securely placed in a car, but the train pulled out that was to start it on its long western journey to the far-away Arizona cattle ranch where Uncle Jethro waited to receive them with open arms.

And there they did remain until the train pulled out and they had the last glimpse of the precious air wonder, safely stowed in its car and headed toward the Land of Promise.

After that the boys were content to walk home, where Frank and Andy soon got busy again in their shop; for they had many things

in process of building, on which they could always spend a spare hour; while Larry and Elephant hung around, ready and willing to assist if only told how to do things.

Of course much of the conversation concerned the new and strange sights that were likely to be the portion of the Bird boys while spending the coming weeks upon a real Southwestern cattle ranch. They brushed up their knowledge of things supposed to be associated with cowboy life; but which of course had been for the most part gleaned from books and the newspapers.

"Ten days, and perhaps our aeroplane will be there," Andy was saying that evening, as he and Frank locked up, preparatory to going home; and he had been yawning for the last hour, on account of having had so little sleep on the preceding night. "That ought to mean we must start from here by another week, don't you think, Frank?"

"Yes, a week from tomorrow morning would be about the right time," replied the other, as he turned the key in the lock and tried the door.

Andy chuckled.

"Mighty careful about that door, I see, Frank; don't mean to take any chances of

somebody getting in our shop, like they did once before when we had that old lock on it. But I know just three fellows who are not thinking of trying any caper like that tonight. If you mentioned it to them, like as not they'd shiver all over and look sick. Because they got the scare of their lives last night. I just reckon they won't feel like creeping in any old dark place for a long time after this."

The two cousins walked along until they came to Frank's house when Andy prepared to stalk off alone.

"Goodnight, Frank," he said, "and here's hoping that we get as good a start as we gave the airship today. A week from tomorrow, you say? Well, in the morning—" another big yawn—"we'll have to get busy, and send Uncle Jethro a long message, telling him when he can look for us, and to have the agent out there keep a watch for our freight. Wow! but I'm that sleepy I can hardly see straight. No, can't stop over with you, because I was away last night, you know, and mom might be worried. So-long, Frank! See you again after breakfast, when we'll get busy with that new drag brake you're working on, and which ought to work like a charm."

"Call me up on the wire when you get home, Andy," said Frank, after him.

"Hey! d'ye think somebody's going to try and kidnap me on the road?" demanded the other.

"No; but I'm afraid you may go to sleep on the way, and keep on walking everlastingly," called out Frank, laughingly, and then closed the door.

CHAPTER V

WHAT THEY FOUND AT WITHERSPOON

"We're almost there, Frank!"

"Yes, the next station is Witherspoon, the brakesman said. Got all your traps ready. Andy?"

"Oh! I've had them gathered up this half hour and more. Whee! ain't it hot down here, though; and won't I be glad to get out of this stuffy sleeper?"

The two cousins had made the long journey at a pretty rapid pace, and at the time these words passed between them, were nearing the end. They had for some time skirted deserts and mountains that looked very strange to their Northern eyes. And when occasionally they caught fugitive glimpses of distant herds of cattle grazing on some miles of grass lands bordering the course of a hidden stream, naturally their thoughts went out to what they expected to see when they had arrived at the cattle ranch of Andy's uncle.

"Uncle Jethro must be a man of some importance down this way," Andy went on to say, "when they go so far as to even name the station after him."

At that Frank chuckled.

"Well," he remarked, drily, "if it looks like some we've seen, that isn't paying your relative a very great honor; because they were the most terrible tumbledown places I ever did set eyes on. But let's hope Witherspoon will turn out to be something different."

"Frank, I do believe the train's beginning to slacken up right now!" cried Andy, all of a tremble with eagerness.

"You're right it is and here comes our friend the brakeman to help us off with all our truck," observed the other Bird boy, who did not show his excitement as much, although no doubt he too was quivering with the anticipation of the coming introduction to Western ways.

Presently the train came to a stop, and the boys having reached the platform of the sleeper stepped off.

As they did so there was a loud whoop from a dozen lusty throats. Looking in the direction from whence these vociferous sounds proceeded they saw a collection of rough and ready picturesque cowboys, just like those who had appeared in the moving picture plays which Frank and Andy had enjoyed from time to time in the little playhouse in Bloomsbury.

They were on foot, but their horses could be

seen hitched along a rail close by, and exhibiting more or less of spirit because of the hissing engine, to which they were evidently not accustomed.

Frank had just shaken hands with the accomodating brakesman, and tipped the colored porter of the sleeper, when he discovered Andy caught in the arms of a tall man, whose snow-white mustache and goatee gave him a distinguished appearance.

Of course this could be no other than Uncle Jethro. Frank knew he would like the ranchman from the start, and that nearly everybody must. While his word was law in that section, at the same time the owner of the ranch was a genial gentleman, whom most of his cowboy hands thought so much of, that they would be willing to go through fire and flood at any time to serve him.

Frank at first sight thought Uncle Jethro looked like a Kentucky Colonel; and that impression never left him.

"So, this is Frank Bird, is it?" exclaimed the cattleman, hurrying over with extended hand which closed on that of the boy with a vim that made him wince. "Well, it does my heart good to see you both. We're going to try and give you the time of your lives down here. Yes, your

freight is in the house yonder, and we're prepared to haul it to the ranch right away. I must say I'm pleased to find you both such a hearty looking lot. And a spell out in this free air will do you a world of good. But won't you come over and shake hands with my boys; they're just wild to meet you. For ten days, now, all the talk around here has been of flying machines. Most of us have never seen such a thing; and yu'd laugh yourselves sick to hear the guesses that have been made about what they look like. Most of the boys are of the opinion it's only a big gas balloon. Here you are, and now let me do the honors."

The train had already pulled out, so that they had the little Arizona station to themselves One by one the cow punchers stepped up, and were properly introduced to each of the Bird boys in turn; generally with some little side remarks that might apply to their appearance. or the name they went by.

In this way the newcomers felt that they already knew considerable about their new friends, even before they had met them five minutes. Cowboys as a rule are not a hard lot to get acquainted with; they are blunt and open and full of questions.

It could be seen that the two boys from the

Far East were objects of intense curiosity to every one of the bunch. They watched them closely, just as though some were secretly of the opinion that Frank and Andy might at any moment suddenly develop a pair of wings that they had up to then kept hidden about their persons, call out a hasty goodbye, and bob up in the air as easy as the ordinary cowpuncher would hurl himself on his pony.

"Now, let's see about getting your freight started, boys," called out Uncle Jethro, after this ceremony had been completed, and the newcomers had been duly welcomed with hearty handshakes by the grinning punchers. "You see, we fetched a big wagon along, with four horses; and likely enough that will get the stuff out home by night. If it looks hard, I'll send back another lot of horses to help pull. And your trunk can go along with you on the back of the carryall. The boys wanted to fetch mounts for you both, but I reckoned that you might not be wholly as much at home on the back of a pony as in your flying machine, so I drove in myself."

Frank thought that was very kind and considerate of Uncle Jethro; who must have known that the wild spirits among the cowboys would be apt to make it a bit unpleasant for green-

horns who were unused to their harum-scarum ways when in the saddle. Wait until they had been there a week, and he believed that he and Andy might be able to hold their own fairly well; for both of them had done more or less horse-back riding, such as is practiced on Eastern roads, and which must be pretty tame compared with the dash of these reckless riders of the range.

The whole lot trooped after them when they accompanied the cattleman to the little freight house. Here their precious aeroplane was found, and so far as they were able to tell from a quick survey of the outside, not the slightest injury had been done during its long journey. This was doubtless due at least to the care the boys had shown in crating and boxing the various parts; and which experience had taught them just how to go about.

Amid more or less excitement and shouting the big wagon was backed up to the door of the freight shed; and then, under the directions of Frank, the loading began. No lack of willing hands, when every one of those sturdy fellows seemed just wild for a chance to just touch the wonderful flying machine, of which they had heard so many stories, most of which they did not believe, of course; for it seemed

like a yarn from the Arabian Nights or Baron Munchausen, this idea of mere boys going up in the air thousands of feet, in a shell of a machine, with a little buzzing motor attached to it; or flying hundreds of miles over the wild forests away down in South America, where they were said to have found the long-lost father of Frank.

All the same, they handled the crates with more or less tenderness. Although no doubt most of them had already decided that it was pretty much of a fake, and that they would be a sold lot by another day, still they were as eager as a parcel of eight year old lads to see what was coming. Talk about the excitement that strikes an Eastern country town when the circus arrives, it could not bear any comparison with the feverish spirit that possessed those jostling cow punchers as they heaved and tugged and loaded up the wagon just as Frank wanted.

When the last crate had been placed on top, the heavier engine being away under all the rest, Frank saw to it that stout ropes secured the whole. And watching just how the boy directed these things, Uncle Jethro nodded his head toward his foreman, Waldo Kline, and winked one eye, just as if to say, "He'll do!"

Finally all seemed ready, and the horses

were apparently anxious to start on the return journey; for quite a number of miles lay between the station where cattle were shipped, and the ranch buildings proper.

Uncle Jethro last of all cautioned the driver to take his time, no matter how long the trip seemed. Not for worlds would he have any upset occur, or a runaway take place. If any injury were done the precious flying machine at this stage of its long journey he would never forgive the one responsible for the trouble. They had waited so long to see the wonderful contraption really sail through the air that he would not answer for what the rest of the boys would do, should they find themselves disappointed.

After that it might be set down for granted that the driver would exercise more than ordinary care in transporting the freight. If an accident should happen the chances were he would feel like mounting a horse immediately and putting for the railroad, to board a train, fearful for his life.

Having strapped the trunk on behind the carryall in which Frank and Andy were already seated, the joyous bunch of punchers made a rush for their horses. The two Easteners watched eagerly to see whether the pictures

did them full justice in mounting; and on the whole they were not in the least disappointed; for every fellow seemed to have his own odd way of flinging himself into the saddle; and the instant the pony felt his weight there would be an upheaval and some tall jumping about, until the rider found his seat, and thrust his toes into the stirrups, and from that instant he seemed to become a part of the animal itself.

"Great, isn't it, Frank? I've pictured that lots of times, but never thought I'd see it with my own eyes. And they seem to be a bully bunch of fellows, warm-hearted as the day is long; and I guess we're going to like it down here, all right!"

Frank thought just the same as Andy seemed to, even though he had not as yet expressed himself that way. Among the dozen cow punchers they would doubtless find a number who would become fast friends; others they might not happen to fancy as well, perhaps on account of some peculiarities, or it might be a retiring disposition on the part of the nomads. But first impressions count for a lot; and it must be confessed that both of the Bird boys were mighty well pleased with their hearty reception by the outfit connected with the Double X Ranch.

"All ready?" called out Mr. Witherspoon; and as no one said anything to the contary he waved his hand to the circling boys.

Immediately a series of shrill "yip-yips" broke out, as the riders went tearing off at a furious pace, to wheel presently and come charging headlong down toward the carryall, waving their hats, and carrying on as though possessed.

"Don't mind 'em, boys," remarked Uncle Jethro, complacently. "They've just got to work off some of the surplus energy that this free life seems to stow up in a man. You'll be doing the same before you're here a week, mark my words. But I have got as fine a bunch of boys as ever threw leg over a bucking broncho; and you'll say as much when you get to know the most of them. Not that they haven't got their faults, but we overlook small things out in this big country, you know, where the sky seems to bend down and touch the earth all around you. Now, step lively along there, Dexter and Silas, you ornery mules, hit up a pace!"

CHAPTER VI

AT THE DOUBLE X RANCH

The Bird Boys would not soon forget that invigorating ride. On all sides they saw a thousand things that excited their wonder; and which they did not hesitate to ask about. And Uncle Jethro was only too willing to explain; he wanted these bright-faced boys who had come to visit him, to learn all about the things with which they would come in daily contact, and the sooner the better.

From this time on there would be a complete change in the air around Frank and Andy. The talk of the cowboys was along the line of ranch life; and by degrees many of the phrases that went to describe such things entering into the daily life of these wild plains riders, would become familiar to the "tenderfeet."

They saw the cactus that grew along the border of the desert; the tufts of what Uncle Jethro called "buffalo grass," possibly because the bison that formerly covered these same plains in countless tens of thousands used to feed upon it; watched the queer antics of a village of prairie dogs they passed on the way to the ranch; and heard the boys speak of a

muddy hole as a "buffalo wallow," though the chances were it had been half a century since such an animal had lain down to rid himself of the flies, by wallowing in the mud and water that came from a rainfall.

Here were a few stray cattle which the rancher termed "Mavericks;" and called to the foreman to mark down, so they could be rounded-up and branded on the morrow; there they overtook an Indian family on the move, with a calico horse harnessed to a couple of long drag-poles, upon which were piled all their worldly possessions, including the squaw herself and a dusky papoose; and once in the distance they saw a line of white-topped wagons that gave the boys a thrill, thinking of those old days when emigrants were in the habit of crossing the plains in such vehicles; until Uncle Jethro kindly explained that this was a freighter's caravan, the prairie schooners being loaded with supplies for the mines that were located away up in the mountains, where it was difficult to get such material, the smelting being done on the ground, and only the pure copper shipped out to the market.

It was altogether too short a ride, Andy loudly declared, when his uncle announced that the ranch buildings were in sight ahead. He

had seen so many new and interesting sights that he thought he could never drink in enough of this air, heated though it might be.

All the same, both lads looked eagerly ahead, anxious to know what the Double X Ranch would turn out to be like.

They saw a cluster of white buildings, none of them over one story in height; and partly surrounded by green trees, that had doubtless influenced the owner to make his headquarters in this particular spot, where good water was to be had in abundance.

Already the boys had started on a gallop for the house, whooping as usual. A genuine happy-go-lucky cow puncher is probably about the noisiest creature on the face of the earth; he never seems to be fully satisfied unless he is making some sort of a racket, either chasing cattle, cavorting on his pony amidst his comrades, or shooting up a border town when on one of his "pay-day" outings.

Before they reached the buildings they had drawn close enough to the passing freight caravan for the boys to even hear the vicious crack of the teamster's long blacksnake whips, and to hear a choice collection of words when some little accident happened to delay the creaking wagons a brief time.

Uncle Jethro was an old bachelor. He had a very efficient housekeeper in a Mrs. Ogden, a middle-aged widow, whose husband had been some sort of cousin to the owner of the ranch, and connected with him slightly in the business, at the time he died.

A beaming Celestial cook, who sailed under the name of Charley Woo, looked after the kitchen, and seemed to satisfy the demands of the vigorous punchers. When he was out with the boys in charge of the "grub wagon," during their round-ups, those left at home were well taken are of by the housekeeper herself.

Everything was so fine that both Andy and Frank knew they were going to have the time of their lives; and would begrudge the days that slipped past. They meant to soak in all the information possible, as well as show these dashing riders that if they were greenhorns in all that was connected with cattle punching, at least they occupied a high standard when it came to bold exploits away up in the clouds.

During the remainder of the day they went here and there, making fresh discoveries at every turn, and fairly saturating themselves with the multitude of things that were associated with this new life.

One of the cowboys in particular had at-

tracted the attention of Andy; and Frank also admitted having taken an immediate liking for the same fellow. He was a lively boy, full of vim and go, and yet with something winning about his ways. They called him "Buckskin," and it was quite a long time before either of the newcomers learned that he had another name, Oliver Cromwell Jones.

He seemed more eager to hear about the exploits of the young aviators than any of the rest; though for that matter they were every one of them hanging around every minute they could spare from their duties, showing the newcomers their bunk-house, the big stables, the enclosure where the saddle band of horses was usually kept when not in use, and everything else they could think of, until both Andy and Frank felt that they were growing confused under so much attention.

And what pleased Frank most of all was a rude building or shed which Uncle Jethro had had built to serve as a hangar for the biplane. Where he got his ideas from they did not know; but it must have been some magazine article; because the affair seemed to answer all requirements; though of course it was a mere shed, and not intended to be locked up.

But such a thing as injury coming to the

precious aeroplane in this isolated place never once occurred to the boys. Surely there was no malicious Percy Carberry, and his shadow Sandy Hollingshead, away down here to want to render the biplane worthless for use; and every one of the punchers acted as though he believed the greatest treat of his whole life would arrive when he actually saw with his own eyes those daring young aviators mount upward toward the sky, until they seemed like a mere speck in the blue vault.

There was one occupant of the ranch building whom the boys were pleased indeed to meet. This was a little fairy of five, named Becky, a blue-eyed child, daughter of a niece of Mr. Witherspoon, who had departed this life. She was a winsome little thing, and the cow punchers seemed to fairly worship her.

Frank guessed that there was a little mystery attached to her, but he did not mean to seem curious, and ask any questions. In due time they learned from Buckskin that this niece had run away with a dashing Mexican named Jose Sandero; and after being cruelly treated by him, had fled once more across the border, arriving with her tiny baby at the Double X Ranch so worn out with fatigue that she had soon passed away.

Her child had been left to Uncle Jethro; but not wanting to risk any chances, he had taken legal means to make himself the guardian of little Becky. And ever since she had been the sunlight of the whole ranch. The boys would stop in the midst of any wordy war, or wild singing, just to listen to the music of her sweet childish voice, that seemed capable of arousing all the best emotions in their natures.

Nothing had ever been seen of the father, and it was taken for granted that he must either be dead, or never wanted to attempt to claim his child. And, Buckskin declared that if ever he did show up round that region, he stood the finest possible chance of pulling hemp that any man ever knew.

That supper was one never to be forgotten. With the smiling Chinaman waiting on the noisy crowd, and appeasing every demand. Andy thought he had never enjoyed anything half so much in all his life. He had often camped out, and eaten the fare that is so greatly relished by every healthy lad with red blood in his veins, but there were so many things connected with this meal at the long table, where some ten ranch riders sat, and exchanged comments characteristic of their occupation, with everything so strange to the tenderfoot,

that it made a deep impression on both the newcomers, never to be eradicated.

Then the punchers trooped off to their bunk-house, to leave the travelers alone, for they felt that they needed considerable of a rest to make up for the fatigues of their long journey.

The man who drove the double team connected with the wagon must have coaxed considerable speed out of them after all without meeting with any accident on the road, for the freight had shown up an hour before sunset, and ere the call came for supper it had all been safely stowed away in the rude hangar, where Frank and his cousin could work at it on the morrow.

It was rather early when the boys sought their comfortable little room, where the white sheets invited them to sound slumber; and the soft night breeze fanned their cheeks, coming through the many windows that were always open.

They sat at the window some time, talking in low tones about many of the strange things they had already seen, and speculating on how this dry air of the desert border would affect them, when they made their first ascension.

Far away the mysterious lowing of herds came faintly to their ears; they could also

catch the whinnying of horses in the stockade; and now and then the sound of music in the shape of a deftly manipulated accordion; or it might be the soft twanging of a Mexican mandolin, while one of the boys warbled softly about some black-eyed senorita he had left behind him in the country of the dons.

After a while the cousins decided that they ought to be in bed, and getting rested for the labors that awaited them in the morning. And once they threw themselves down, they were lost to the world in a few minutes.

Of course they dreamed as every boy does pretty much all the time. And it was only natural that Andy's mind should go back while he slept to other days, when he and Frank were engaged in the hottest of races with their rival, Percy Carberry, who was just as deeply interested in all matters connected with aviation as they had been.

Many a time had they found themselves compelled to sit up and guard their property when they had by some successful exploit aroused the worse elements in the jealous nature of this rival. And even now, though removed from the home town and Percy by several thousand miles, Andy had to dream that once again a dark cloud was hovering

over their fortunes, and all caused by the hatred of this boy who for more than two years had been the one thorn in their flesh.

So vivid had been his dream that Andy actually suddenly awoke with a low cry, and sat up in bed, trembling all over.

"What's the matter?" demanded Frank, also springing up.

Before Andy could frame any sort of answer, owing to the confusion of ideas that seemed to be tumbling pell mell through his brain, both of them were thrilled to hear a voice from somewhere outside shouting:

"Wake up! help! help! fire! Whoop! get busy there, fellows!"

As though governed by a couple of springs the cousins leaped from their comfortable bed, and rushing over to one of the windows that looked toward where the new shed covering the precious aeroplane stood, they saw a sight that thrilled as well as alarmed them.

CHAPTER VII

A PRETTY CLOSE CALL

"Oh! it's our hangar on fire!" gasped Andy.

"Quick, get into something then, and out we go!" cried Frank, always the prompt one to act in an emergency.

Andy hardly knew how he ever did manage to drag on a pair of trousers, and his shoes. His hands were shaking so he could hardly do what he aimed to accomplish; and all the while the shouts were increasing in violence, as well as that terrible light growing brighter.

By the time he had managed to get the second shoe on, Frank was already outside; and having seen how easily the other jumped through the window to the ground, Andy hastened to follow his example.

Already there was a group of the punchers at work; and the clear commanding tones of Mr. Witherspoon's voice could be heard telling them just what to do. Fortunately it had always been a set principle of the rancher to prepare for war in time of peace, and he had a drilled fire department, with the hose and extinguisher handy.

Every fellow knew just where he fitted in;

and perhaps it was this very system that prevented much damage being done. Instead of great confusion, with each eager fire-fighter getting in the way of the others, and nothing worth while being accomplished, the genius at the head of the combination saw that every man occupied the place that had been laid out for him.

And when several chemical fire extinguishers started to get busy, it was a losing fight with that conflagration; though possibly had it been given another quarter of an hour in which to get a firm grip on the contents of the shed, there must have been a far different story to tell.

All this while the boys seemed to feel their hearts choking them with burning anxiety. What if after all their precious aeroplane should be injured after so successfully passing through the perils of that long journey! It was like a slap in the face, as Andy termed it.

And it may be readily understood that, when the water with which that end of the long shed had thoroughly drenched the last spark of fire, so that it was safe to enter, they hurried in alongside Uncle Jethro, who was breathing all sorts of bitterness toward the one whose carelessness had brought about this accident,

both Frank and his cousin were in a feverish state of suspense.

Eagerly they made the rounds escorted by the equally anxious Buckskin and the other range riders. It was almost pitiful to see how these usually loud voiced fellows now had not a whisper to spare; but just watched the faces of the young aviators, and waited to hear the verdict.

And then, when finally the rounds had been made, and Frank gave it as his opinion that no damage worth mentioning had come about, it seemed as though the very roof of that shed would be fairly lifted from its supports by the volume of the lusty shouts that soared upwards from the leather-lined throats of Buckskin and his companions.

Those who had been slightly burned in fighting the blaze went around showing the red marks with the pride that a warrior might in his scars of battle; and the forlorn chaps who had come off unscathed felt sorry because they had not seen to it that they secured their share of the hall marks of fame when they had the chance.

Each cowboy had to line up and shake hands with Frank and Andy, while he offered congratulations on the lucky outcome of what

at one time had threatened to be a national misfortune. And they looked as happy over it as though some rich uncle had suddenly stepped off, leaving them a fortune; or a big cattle ranch, which is the cowboy conception of great good luck.

But Mr. Witherspoon was not so easily satisfied. That fire had not started of its own account. Either some one had been exceedingly careless, criminally so, or else there was a mystery back of its happening; and he meant to know which of the two possibilities was the truth.

So he started an investigation right on the spot, with the half-clad punchers brought up before him one after the other. It was easily proven who had been last at the shed; but this was one of the oldest and most reliable of the force, a man by the name of Steady Matt; and he declared that when he left the new building it was perfectly safe, nor had he seen a single match struck by a cowboy while there—this being one of the little fads of the rancher, who was next door to a crank concerning the careless use of matches about the place.

"Now, the boys, they seem to reckon, Mr. Witherspoon, that it might a-been the work of an outside party; leastwise, that's what they

say," remarked Buckskin, when the examination seemed about to end, without any one being a bit the wiser.

"Oh! is that so, Buckskin?" ejaculated the rancher, looking immediately interested. "Suppose you tell me, then, what they are talking about. We've had our little differences with Major Cloud and his Circle Ranch crowd; but I wouldn't want to think any man who ever threw a leg over a pony's back, or snapped a quirt as he rounded up cattle, could be guilty of such a nasty job as trying to burn a neighbor's buildings."

"'Tain't them, Mr. Witherspoon," the puncher went on to say, earnestly, as he slapped his leather chaps with the stick he held; "p'raps Rustler Carlos'd fill the bill more like, sir."

"Well, I wouldn't put such a job past that sneak one minute," declared the rancher, promptly, "and he certainly has plenty of cause to hate me, after the way we took that bunch of stolen long-horns away from him last spring, and gave him a close call before he could cross the border into Mexico. But he hasn't been heard of around here since then; so it must be only a wide guess you boys are making. But I'd a thousand times rather think that, than have a man in my employ be

careless, or ready to play a low-down trick like that."

"If we thought it was done a purpose, Mr. Witherspoon, and could find out the feller that done it, there'd be some queer fruit a-growin' on one of them telegraph poles along the Santa Fe railroad; ain't it so, boys?" and the indignant Buckskin turned around upon the cluster of listening hustlers.

The instantaneous shout of wild approval that greeted these words would have convinced any listener of the evident sincerity of the group. If there was one among them who had yielded to any sort of temptation, it was evident that he could not be easily persuaded to make a second attempt. But after all, it seemed silly to think such a thing could be true; when the Bird boys did not have an enemy down here in this new country, where every one had been an utter stranger until now.

"But let's forget all about it," said Frank, at this juncture. "Not a speck of harm has been done, and we're as sure that no one here would dream of trying to injure our machine as we are that we draw breath."

"Bully for you, Frank!" shouted one of the punchers; and of course another wild cheer

had to allow some of the pent-up enthusiasm to break loose.

Had any one been passing along the trail that led to the mines, and which ran about a mile from the ranch buildings, and heard all this clamor at dead of night, he must have been greatly puzzled to account for the racket; and possibly think that the Double X outfit were making a night of it with good cheer.

"There's one thing sure," said Uncle Jethro, positively, "after this we're not going to let this flying machine of yours, boys, lie unguarded. I leave it to my foreman, Waldo Kline, here, to see that it holds safe; and he'll be accountable to me for it."

"Wow! we'll all camp around it, if so be he says the word!" cried Buckskin, with a look toward his chums, which brought out encouraging comments.

"Come on back to the house, Frank and Andy," remarked the rancher, "and you can just as well make up your minds that after this no piece of property was ever so jealously guarded as your machine will be. I'm sorry for the wretch that tried to do it any injury after this. He'll sure believe he's run up against the biggest hurricane ever, the way those boys will rustle him."

And Frank believed him.

He went back deeply thankful that no harm had befallen the aeroplane before it made its maiden trip in those Arizona hot airs; and yet puzzled to account for the fire.

"Do you really think it was an accident, Frank?" asked Andy, when they found themselves once more alone in their little room.

"Ask me something easy, won't you?" replied the other, as he prepared to crawl into bed again. "I wish I did know the truth, because I don't like this thing of suspecting any fellow, when he may be as innocent as you and me. But honest now, I can't bring myself to believe that it was an accident."

"Well, there may be something in that story about the Mexican they call Rustler Carlos," Andy went on to say. "Buckskin was telling me some things about his doings around this region some years back. He cut a pretty wide swathe, they say; and in his many 'drives' carried off hundreds of fat cattle across the border into Mexico, where it wasn't safe for Americans to go, because they sort of hate Gringoes down there, you know."

"Yes, I understand," Frank added, "and just as Uncle Jethro said, he was the first to really break up this fine and profitable rustler

business of the cattle thieves. This Carlos must hate him with all the fury his breed can show. And if he ever did have nerve enough to run up this way again, I guess he'd be glad to try and do the Double X Ranch people a rough turn, if he saw the chance. But perhaps we'll know more about this thing some time later."

"Yes," Andy went on to say, a little vindictively, for he had been much worked up over the threatened destruction of the planes and woodwork of the aeroplane; "and if this Rustler Carlos should happen around again, I reckon it'll be hardly worth mentioning what they won't do to him. I never saw fellows madder than these boys seem to be right now. And Frank, I kind of think they've taken a great liking to you, on so short an acquaintance."

"Better say yourself, Andy," retorted the other immediately; "because everybody nearly does, that meets you. Now roll over, and quit thinking about the thing. It's all right, and no damage done, so go to sleep like a good fellow. You won't get a single word out of me, I warn you."

And Andy knowing that his cousin meant it did proceed to chase all thoughts of the recent excitement from his mind, so that he might

settle down again into a sound sleep, for it seemed that midnight had no more than passed, so that a long period still remained before the coming of dawn awoke them.

There was no further alarm.

Doubtless that cordon of slumbering cowboys lying around the new shed formed so close a protection, that even a wandering rattlesnake could hardly have passed the line without being challenged.

And when Frank opened his eyes again, the light of day was shining in through the two windows facing the east; so that, hearing sounds that told of breakfast being made ready, he gave Andy a kick, telling him to bestir himself, if he hoped to start the day rightly by appearing at early breakfast with the rest of the Double X outfit.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRONCHO BUSTER MEETS HIS MATCH

Such a busy day as they put in.

It was hard for the foreman to influence the cow-punchers to look after their customary avocations, for they wanted to be hanging around that hangar all the time, watching Frank and Andy assemble the various queer parts of the delicate contraption that, when completed would be called a biplane.

The idea that any one would dare trust himself in such a little contrivance, and soar like the white-headed eagle away up above the clouds, staggered the belief of these fellows; all of whom wanted to be "shown" before they would be willing to admit that such a wonderful thing could ever come to pass.

They looked on the Bird boys with almost reverence. Such pluck and daring outdistanced their own reckless horseback plunging as far as the sun outshines the yellow moon.

Some of them tried their very best to make themselves useful, and even pleaded with the boys to think up some way in which they could "run and fetch," so that the foreman would excuse them from going out on the range after

stray mavericks, or rounding up bunches of cattle that may have strayed toward the dangerous coulies of the mountains, where all sorts of danger would await them.

But as they needed no assistance whatever, Frank had to shake his head, even to the persistent Buckskin, for he knew that if he favored one it would create bad feeling among the rest and this was something to be avoided, so early in their acquaintance with these warm-hearted but impulsive cattle punchers.

When noon came the aeroplane was taking shape, and beginning to look like something. A little help was needed when it came to installing the motive power; but there was plenty to be had; in a pinch even the grinning Charley Woo would have been willing to lend a hand; although he had privately announced it as his opinion that if this wonderful affair, that looked so much like the big box-kites flown in his native country, could sail away above the clouds, they would never set eyes on the two bold young navigators again; and he also said that Mr. Witherspoon ought to keep control of the flying machine by means of a rope, so that he could pull it down when he thought best.

It was really wonderful how quickly all the boys got through with their jobs on this par-

ticular day. Where under ordinary conditions they would not have shown up at the ranch house until evening, they now came galloping in like mad by two o'clock, and before three had arrived not a single puncher was out on the range.

Mr. Witherspoon smiled and nodded his head good-naturedly when he noticed this significant fact.

"Already your coming has borne fruit, you see," he remarked to Frank; "and if it keeps up we're going to have the greatest lot of hustlers here at the Double X Ranch you ever heard tell of. They can do things like lightning these days. And look at the way they hang around, just devouring both of you boys with stares. I guess you've got them locoed for a fact," and when Frank, who wanted to know what everything meant, stopped him right there to ask for an explanation, the obliging rancher told how there was a certain weed known as the loco, which, when cattle indulged in it, made them crazy for a time, so that they were apt to rush into streams and be drowned, or pitch pell mell over precipices in their blindness and excitement.

About four o'clock Frank announced that everything was ready for the first ascent and the

feverish punchers could hardly contain themselves. It needed only a word to get them to do anything that was required; for the time being they were ready to act as slaves, if by so doing they could hasten developments.

There was a splendid level stretch upon which the first run could be made; indeed, that was one beauty of aeroplaning on the plains, where difficulties would not be met with in landing, or making an ascent.

Frank gave the signal, and willing hands assisted in starting the strange affair with its box-like wings. Charley Woo hid behind a pile of crate material as though really fearing that the spirits of the air might be offended by this bold invasion, and start to visit their vengeance on the whole lot who had assisted in the work.

But the cowboys jumped for their horses, and mounting like a flash, started to gallop after the young aviators, fully expecting that they would have the mournful office of gathering up their remains, and transporting them back to the ranch house.

Judge of their astonishment and wild delight when they saw the aeroplane leave the earth, take a turn upward when the forward plane was elevated, and start in the direction of the

few fleecy, floating white clouds that hovered overhead.

How they yelled and shrieked and pranced about as though they had really and truly lost their heads. And then, gathering in a bunch they watched the wonderful evolutions which those skilful air pilots put their willing steed through, as thoroughly entranced as though they had been put under the magic power of a wizard.

Frank was not taking unnecessary chances. He wanted to know the conditions of this new country before attempting any of the more difficult maneuvres which he and Andy were accustomed to carrying out in their home circles, where they understood the wind and its peculiarities to a dot.

But the most simple trick was greeted with hoarse shouts by that cluster of eager watchers below. And when the young aviators began to bore up and up in circle until they were fully six thousand feet high, the amazed and delighted spectators almost broke their necks staring after them, afraid lest they miss a part of the spectacle if they so much as turned away for a single instant.

Then again they came circling down in great loops, while the little gathering near the ranch

house stood and gaped and wondered if they were really awake, or passing through a vivid dream of enchantment.

The conditions being favorable, Frank gave his companion due warning as to what he was about to do, and then started to volplane downward. Immediately cries of horror broke out from those intrepid range riders, who naturally believed something must have broken aboard the aeroplane, and that the Bird Boys were now being hurled to earth, from which they would later on be picked up lifeless.

When they saw the flying machine suddenly recover a level position, and with the merry hum of the motor start again to spin along, about two hundred feet above their heads, the punchers fell into each others' arms, as though too weak to stand up any longer.

Shortly afterwards Frank brought his aerial steed to a landing just at the very point where he had taken his departure half an hour before; and so lightly did the heavier-than-air machine settle that it seemed as though an egg could hardly have been broken by the impact, had it come between.

They were immediately overwhelmed with warm congratulations because of the marvelous work they had done while aloft. It had been

only the common, every-day experience of Frank and Andy; but in the eyes of these untamed Western spirits was wonderful beyond compare.

"Here's Buckskin been boasting that if you boys could go up, he guessed he could too. Take him for a little airing, Frank. Let him make good, or shut up!" one of the cowboys exclaimed.

"Would you like to try a little spin, Buckskin; Andy here will make way for you if you say the word?" Frank asked.

Now, the aforesaid Buckskin would have instantly declined but they had him in a hole, where he must take water, or else put on a bold front. And as a cowboy invariably hates to back down, once he has made his boast, he tried to look quite indifferent as he replied:

"Sure I'd like to take a little turn of a dozen miles or two with you, Frank, if you'll ask me. I ain't had no experience in ridin' one of them cantankerous mounts; but they can't find a broncho able to throw me; and who's afraid, anyhow? Tell me what to do, and show me how to do it, and I'm there all to the good, and wool a yard wide."

So Andy climbed down, and the cowboy, sheepskin chaps and all, took his place. He

made out to be utterly at his ease; and it was only Frank who knew from personal contact just how Bucksin was trembling all the while.

"All you have to do is to sit perfectly still; and don't offer to do anything to help me. If I want any assistance I'll sing out for it," was the way the pilot of the biplane laid down the law; and Buckskin promised faithfully that he would adhere to the rules of the game to the letter.

The start was made just as perfectly as before, and then Frank began to perform a number of simple evolutions before making a try for altitude.

The dazed cowboy may have had a smile on his face all the while, but it was of the kind that won't come off, virtually frozen there. He clutched the seat with rigid fingers, and stared out straight to where in the distance he could see the summit of Mount Baker, said to be seven thousand feet high, but which he believed was far below his lofty eyrie.

Once, when he did catch faint yells from the crowd so far below him, Buckskin mustered up assurance enough to take off his hat, and wave it several times; but never once would he look straight down toward where the others were cheering him to the echo.

When finally, after a whole lot of turning, until his senses fairly reeled, he heard Frank say that they were nearly through, the scared cowboy regained courage enough to send a sickly grin down at his comrades. Of course Frank would not think of volplaning with a greenhorn aboard, as the chances were, he would take fright and either leap out under the impression that they were bound to have a smash-up anyhow, or else make some frantic move that would endanger the very lives of both occupants of the biplane.

And so they landed as neatly as any pilot of an air craft could possibly do. The relieved Buckskin almost dazed, managed to drop from his perch, his hands to be warmly shaken by his chums, while they assured him that he had done the whole outfit proud by his recent gallant act.

But it might have been noticed that Buckskin never again ventured to accompany either one of the Bird boys aloft. He vowed that it was the finest experience he had ever known, and one that he would not have missed for a fortune; but all the same, he knew when he had had enough; and the other fellows could try their hands at copying the old eagle, if they wished; the land was good enough for him, all right.

After the business of the day had been completed the aeroplane was once more successfully stowed away in its handy hangar, which was amply large enough to accommodate it even when the planes were extended.

It was just at this time Mr. Witherspoon beckoned Frank and Andy to cross over to where he was standing, having come out of the house.

"Please give me a few minutes of your time, boys," he said gravely, "something has happened since you went up that seems to possibly throw a light on what happened last night," and a minute later, as the three sat down in his little office or den, the genial rancher went on to remark, "tell me, was the name of that evil genius of yours, who tried all he could to injure you two, Percy Carberry, or something like that?"

CHAPTER IX

FIGURING IT ALL OUT

"What's that you say, Uncle Jethro?" exclaimed Andy, his face wreathed in an expression of sheer astonishment; for it gave him a tremendous shock to hear that nightmare of a name, Percy, mentioned away out here in Arizona.

"I'm sure," the rancher went on, "you said something to me about a scamp who was forever trying to do you both an ill turn up around home; and unless I'm mistaken, you also told me he was the only son of a wealthy but foolish widow, who supplied him with all the money he asked for. The first name was Percy, that I'd swear; and the last one began with the letters C-a-r, now didn't it, boys?"

"Carberry, that's it, uncle," burst out Andy.

"But what makes you ask that, sir?" demanded Frank, looking curiously at what seemed to be a scrap of paper in the fingers of the gentleman.

"This is what made me mention it; it is apparently a small part of a letter that some one at this place must have received not a great while back, and which he thought best to de-

stroy; but one of the fragments lodged in a bush; and when my foreman chanced to notice it, and idly picked it up, he was interested in the few words he could make out, so he brought it to me. Here, take a look for yourselves, boys, and tell me what you think."

On the piece of paper with the ragged edges there could only be made out some dozen or two words; a portion of these being incomplete, though easily guessed.

These ran irregularly, and might be set down in something like the following order: "Fifty dolla—good job of it—anyway you like—burn it to cinde—hear how it—ld friend, Percy Car——"

Andy nearly had a fit when he read this; Frank, on his part, felt the blood boil within him, though better able to conceal the state of his feelings, or rather control his temper, than his impulsive cousin.

"Why, just think of that, would you?" exclaimed Andy, "not satisfied with doing everything in his power to injure the Bird Boys while they were up there, this contemptible ingrate actually has the nerve to write to some fellow who, he happened to know, was working on or near this ranch, and sent him fifty dollars, which was to pay him for doing something

to make all our journey down here useless—he even put it in his head to burn our aeroplane, and all that! Oh! he is certainly the meanest fellow that ever came down the pike. I almost wish we'd left him up there on the summit of Old Thunder-Top, Frank, to get what he deserved."

"Oh! I wouldn't say that, Andy," remarked his cousin, "it's a rough deal, I know, but when we could save those fellows it was our duty to do it, no matter whether they were of any use in the world or not. You never can tell how things are going to turn out."

"You nearly always can when Percy Carberry has got to do with it," grumbled Andy.

"Now, suppose you enlighten me as to what all this talk is about," demanded the rancher. "Am I to understand that you once saved the very life of this boy, who is right now doing his level best to play you a mean trick?"

And so between them the boys had to relate the story, which has been given in an earlier volume of this series, how they started in a desperate race with Andy for the crown of the rocky height not many miles away from Bloomsbury, away up in New York State; and a storm of wind coming up, the aeroplane of Andy was wrecked, so that he might have even lost his

life, only that the Bird Boys managed to hold on to him; and afterwards get the two boys, one at a time, safely to the ground.

"Of all the cases of base ingratitude, that beats everything," declared the indignant rancher; and he forthwith set out to call every puncher and employee on the place around him; after which he told the story and while they listened in breathless wonder he went on to say, angrily:

"If there chances to be any one within the sound of my voice who received that letter, which I can hardly believe, I want to give him fair warning right now, that if the slightest harm comes to either of these brave boys while they are visiting at Double X Ranch, or if any further attempt is made to injure their airship, the punchers of this outfit have my hearty consent to carry out their own sweet will; yes, and by thunder! under certain conditions, I'd be willing to help pull on the rope!"

A salvo of cheers interrupted his words. Apparently they had found an echo in every heart. But then Frank knew very well that if the guilty one were present, it would be only good policy on his part to shout just as loud as the rest, for fear lest suspicion be directed in his quarter.

A short time later he saw Buckskin beckoning to him. Several of the other boys seemed to be clustered around him, as though they had been comparing notes.

"You see, Frank," began Buckskin, when the other joined the group, "none of us boys feel quite right on 'count of the way Mr. Witherspoon said that same. It kinder made us feel oneasy like. We kept a-lookin' at each other, just like we was a wonderin' whether it could be this one, or that other night wrangler. Why, all of us feel meaner nor a mule skinner about the same. And we've got together in a bunch to talk it over, so's to larn who it was got a letter from the East lately; and we struck pay dirt right away."

"I'm glad of that," said Frank, "though I hope it isn't going to make trouble for any fellow on the pay roll of Double X Ranch."

Buckskin grinned.

"That's where he played it fine," he said. "Member the slim chap you met yesterday when you landed, and who went by the name of Parsons? Well, he gave notice as he'd been called back home, and had to quit here last night; so off he goes late in the afternoon, bag and baggage. None of us seemed to cotton to him much, though as a puncher he knew his

business all right, and was fair spoken enough. But there always seemed to be something slick about him that stood us off. Now, several of us, on comparing notes, chances to remember that the Parson he had a letter from East somewhere only a few days back. Looky here, Frank, did you ever know anybody up in your town by the name of Edmondson; because that was his real name, Collins Edmondson it was, though we always called him Parson because he was so solemn like."

Frank looked at his cousin, who was also of the group.

"That is certainly the name of his uncle over in Rahway," declared Andy, "yes, and I remember hearing that name Collins before. I guess you've struck pay dirt this time, Buckskin. And I'm glad, for one, that now we know no man on this ranch would be guilty of such a mean game as setting our machine on fire."

Buckskin was immensely pleased with the remarkable results of his figuring, and detective work. He hastened over to tell Mr. Witherspoon all about it; and soon afterward the rancher was seen to wring his hand until he undoubtedly made the tears come in to the stunted cow-puncher's eyes.

Great was the indignation among the rest

of the boys when they learned what appeared to be the probable truth. Some of them were making hurriedly for their horses, muttering under their breath; and Mr. Witherspoon had to do some quick hustling in order to cut the threatening mutiny off.

"Let the snake go, boys," he said. "He didn't carry out his contemptible scheme, after all, thanks to your promptness and bravery. I give you permission that if ever he shows his head around these diggings again, which isn't likely, you can treat him to a nice warm coat, even if you have to borrow my tar kettle, and steal one of my best down pillows. That goes, boys; so just turn back now."

Which the impulsive ones did, knowing that the rancher was a man of his word, and evidently did not want the affair carried any further. But doubtless they would manage to get word to the Parson, if so be he had found employment anywhere in the country, that unless he felt cold, and wanted a splendid down coat applied, regardless of cost, he would be wise to keep away from Double X Ranch.

Andy begged that scrap of paper from his uncle. He declared he meant to keep it carefully and compare the writing with some of Percy Carberry's later on; and if this convicted

him, he would throw the matter up to him right on the school campus in the presence of a score of the higher scholars, and spread his proofs before them, so that they could let the cur know what they thought of his mean actions.

Andy could be a good hater when he had occasion for it; he always declared that he had a strain of good old Scotch blood in him that rose to the surface every now and then.

"Seems to me that lets Rustler Carlos out of it," remarked Buckskin, turning to some of the others with a wide grin, a little later, when he came back feeling tenderly of his digits, that had a pinched look, where they had lain in the tremendous grip of the rancher.

"Well," said another puncher, an old fellow called "Shorty," though he was six feet in height, "he'd be guilty of anything just as bad, if so be he happened around; and for one I'm a-goin' to keep my eyes skinned for signs of him. Some say he crossed the line again below here fifty miles, and made a swoop through the Underwood section; but that report has been denied, and none of us know what to believe. So it stands to reason we ought to keep on guard, and remember that Carlos, he don't hold our crowd in high esteem."

The boys felt in splendid spirits as night

came on again. Apparently, now, all clouds had rolled by, and they ought to have clear sailing after this. There were dozens of other thrills they were holding back in store for future exhibitions; for the Bird Boys had already learned that secret of exhibitors to always keep the best in reserve.

On special invitation from the boys they went over to the bunk house that night and spent the time with them, listening to stories of thrilling interest connected with the wild life of the desert trails, and the valleys among the mountains in that strip of Arizona, most singular of all the States in the Union in its many sharp contrasts with regard to the rock strata and mineral formations.

In return, Frank and Andy told in a modest way something of the many exploits in which they had been concerned as air voyagers. Most of all, the punchers wanted to hear about how they had gone down to South America, and found Frank's missing father a prisoner in a cliff-enclosed valley, into which he had fallen at the time his runaway balloon drifted far to the south from the Panama Peninsula, when he was conducting a series of experiments, and explorations in the interest of the great

Northern college with which his name had long been connected as a scientist.

Andy was not so backward as his cousin about telling of what wonderful things they had seen, and how close to death they had been on numerous occasions; he even took advantage of the opportunity to describe how often Frank's splendid nerve had been the only thing that had kept them from instant destruction; and although the other tried to make light of the facts, those hardy cow-punchers realized that in this slender stripling, who was so modest, and yet so self-possessed, they saw as true a hero as ever had his name recorded in the annals of history.

CHAPTER X

LEARNING THE ROPES ON A RANCH

The days began to just glide away, and every one saw Frank and Andy finding new sources of keen enjoyment.

They seldom lost a day for a while but that they went up for a short time, at least, in the aeroplane that was the marvel and admiration of the whole ranch. Those who worked on other cattle ranges were no longer startled when they saw a strange object not unlike a monstrous bird come spinning overhead, and disappearing in the distance. Though they never failed to stop their work, no matter what that might be, and gape upwards, as long as the aeroplane remained in sight, still, they no longer fired at it, as happened at first.

The boys had been warned by Uncle Jethro in the beginning that in making their flights miles away from home they would be wise to keep a pretty considerable distance aloft. There was never any telling what cowboys would do; and they were so apt to empty their guns at what they fancied must be some queer bird belonging to the supposed to be extinct class. At any rate, the warning was heeded, and on

numerous occasions Frank and Andy believed that they profited from it. Indeed, it seemed to be the usual thing, whenever they passed over a cowboy in some strange section of the country, for him to whip out his gun and empty it; after which he would sometimes dodge, and try to conceal himself under a tree, or a clump of sage brush, or it might be a sentinel cactus ten feet high, growing on the border of the desert.

But by degrees the news was circulating around that this was one of the new fangled aeroplanes, and the shooting began to grow less frequent, though the young aviators did not take more chances than they could help.

Frequently, now, there would be company at the ranch and bunk house. In fact, these days Double X Ranch was fast becoming the Mecca for the entire neighborhood. Whenever a party of punchers got a holiday, instead of going off to town to indulge in a booze, they would start over to see the "wonder of the air," and hope that the young pilots of the upper currents would perform for them.

This got to be such a nuisance that finally Frank had to announce that they were only going up on certain days, when the exhibition would be free. And at such times there was

sure to be quite a crowd present, all wild to see how this queer steed that flew through the air at the rate of from forty to eighty miles an hour, or even a full hundred on occasion, was managed.

Meanwhile the two boys who had been singularly fortunate, in that they did not meet with a single serious accident. Outside of the intense heat they had little of a disagreeable nature to contend with in this Arizona climate, where winds did not often visit the lowlands in great force, and a dead calm usually prevailed. And as soon as they were aloft, they found the atmosphere decidedly cool, even cold, since they were quickly free from the earth's radiation.

Of course, they had scoured the immediate country, and even ventured a short way out over the desert, dropping low enough to observe the strange formation of the billows of sand that reminded them of the sea, note the peculiarities that marked the tall cactus plants; and make up their minds that there could be a great many more pleasant things happen to them than getting lost on this burning stretch, with little or no water to quench their raging thirst.

After the first glimpse of that waste stretch, the boys always made sure to carry a big bottle of water along with them when starting out. And Uncle Jethro declared that it was a wise

precaution, as they could never tell when such a thing might prove to be a life preserver, if not for themselves, then possibly in the case of another who had unfortunately lost himself on the desert, and whose plight they might discover from aloft.

But while they scoured the level in this fashion, the boys were cautious about trying to fly over the rugged elevations to the north, where the mines were being operated, to which the trains of wagons containing supplies headed so frequently.

They found just as they expected, that the winds were apt to be contrary in this region, and that it was more or less dangerous to attempt to fly where at any minute a furious gust would suddenly strike the aeroplane on the right quarter; which was hardly guarded against, when a second rush of air would swoop down from still another angle, threatening to overturn the sprawling flier with its violence.

One visit in this direction was enough for them, and on this occasion they saw the mouth of one of the mines, with a curious group standing as usual gazing upward in open-mouthed wonder.

Those mountains presented a grim aspect that impressed both the boys exceedingly, and

they would never forget the sight. Andy had brought a new kodak, which his father had purchased in order that they might carry back something to show the folks at home. It was small in size, but with an expensive lens; and capable of producing very fine pictures; so that they hoped to have a display worth looking at by the time these were all developed and prints made later on.

Nothing that was interesting escaped Andy, and he had developed quite a liking for his new occupation, being constantly on the lookout for scenes that he thought would make good prints.

But it must not be supposed that all this time the Bird Boys were so much occupied with scouring the regions of the upper air for fifty or a hundred miles in every direction, that they neglected to take advantage of the opportunities presented to observe what life on a great cattle ranch was like, for this was not so.

As time passed they limited their flights more and more, having discovered other sources of amusement that held their interest; because by this time flying no longer possessed the novelty for them that it had in the beginning; and once they had exhausted the new sights of the region, they were not so anxious to go up as

they were to mount ponies, and see something of life with the cow punchers.

By degrees they were learning a great many things that they had never dreamed would ever fall to their lot. Being young, and quick to pick up new "stunts," both of them gave promise of soon making average riders, at least, though they might not hope to equal some of the punchers who were more reckless by nature, and handled their mounts as though a cayuse were a machine, governed by their sole whim.

Both Frank and Andy had their own ponies, and could dash like mad over the level, plying both voice and quirtin the endeavor to come in ahead; for cowboys spend much of their time in this sort of racing.

They had adopted something of the dress of the others, and even wore the customary "chaps" made of leather and handsomely decorated, and to which they soon became accustomed in spite of the first awkward feeling.

And so, daily they were seeing more and more of life on the range. They visited the prairie dog village and shot rattlers that were dozing outside the holes in which they lived at peace with the queer little animals that amused

Andy so, and which he stalked on the sly, so as to take home some pictures of them.

They learned to throw a rope with a fair degree of skill, although this takes long practice, if one wishes to become an expert. Neither of them ever actually threw a cow, though they believed they would be able to do so in time, if they kept this thing up long enough.

They did like to watch the regular punchers do the trick and get the rope around the snubbing post like lightning every time. Both Frank and Andy could hobble a broncho equal to the next one; and on one occasion had spent a night on the range "wrangling" horses, which meant that they kept company with the guard whose duty was to watch the precious saddle band, and prevent them from straying, which catastrophe would be apt to leave the party without mounts for their morrow's work; and this is really the worst thing that could happen to cowboys, who seldom walk if they can help it.

Later on there was to be the regular fall round-up, and the boys expected to be able to accompany the outfit, and see the youngsters branded after the most approved fashion, with Andy capturing numerous pictures that would show just how the entire operation were carried out.

One evening while the two boys were sitting with Mr. Witherspoon on the big verandah which was kept screened to prevent an onslaught from insect pests, the genial rancher surprised Frank and Andy by casually remarking:

"I rather think, now, that we'll have a decent day for our little expedition tomorrow; and that the heat will be somewhat less pronounced than usual."

Andy looked at his cousin. Uncle Jethro had already sprung several little surprises on them and seemed to enjoy it immensely so that they immediately scented something new.

"What sort of trip is that, Uncle?" asked Andy, seeing that the rancher was waiting to be questioned.

He pretended to be surprised, and raised his eyebrows as he remarked:

"Oh! is it possible that I forgot to mention to you that I've arranged to take you on a little shooting trip tomorrow, just to break the monotony of your existence here, and perhaps give you a chance to carry home a memento of life down in Arizona, that every time you scrape your feet upon it, will call up a few of the things that have happened here."

"Please go on, and tell us more about it, Uncle; do we get a chance to snap off a picture

of a bunch of antelopes this time; that wolf scene is going to turn out a jim-dandy, I reckon; and I'm anxious to try another," Andy went on to say.

"Well, you boys have sure locoed the whole community with that wonder of an aeroplane, and perhaps, if the ranchers hope to get any decent work out of their punchers, we'd better give them a little rest along that line. But we've been troubled of late with losing some of our best heifers; and the boys declare they've found tracks of a grizzly that comes down out of the hills and gets his supper every once in so often. So Buckskin is going along to show us where he thinks the old fellow lives; and perhaps you can get a snapshot of him before we start in to puncture his tough old hide with our lead. How about that, boys; think you'd like to see how we rid the country of a pest that plays havoc with our herds?"

Frank smiled and nodded as if pleased, but Andy as usual broke out into a series of exclamations that told how delighted he would be at the chance.

"Then it's a go," remarked Mr. Witherspoon, carelessly, as though such things as bagging a ferocious grizzly bear were, after all

of every day occurrence in the life of a cattle raiser; and to be looked up, as Andy, for instance might consider an ordinary flight over the level plain, "I'll see to it that you both have guns, and we'll start shortly after breakfast, so as to do most of our riding before it gets too hot. Then, if we want, after we've bagged our game we might hang round in the foothills and try to keep cool until near sunset, when we'll start back," and he went on talking of other things as though this were but a small matter.

CHAPTER XI

OUT FOR BEAR

"What do you think of this for a place to rout out a bear, eh, boys?" and as Mr. Withspoon asked this question he drew in his sweating pony, and jumped to the ground.

The Bird Boys glanced around them. It was a wild prospect that greeted their gaze. They had left the level plains and entered among the rocky foothills that stretched out from the spur of the great Rockies reaching far down into Arizona.

In all probability this State has a greater range of extremes in the way of geographic features than any other in the Union. It possesses arid deserts, fertile plains; and the whole upper part is a mass of rugged mountain ranges, some of them as yet really never fully explored, and in which many valuable minerals have been found that yield fortunes to the capitalists whose money has made the mines possible.

These contrasts are often sharply defined, the desert touching the very border of a fertile tract, or running to the edge of the uplifts where, among the rocks, some rippling little stream

dashes down, to mysteriously disappear under the burning sands as though swallowed up.

After a rather long and exhausting gallop that covered many miles the little hunting party of four had now arrived among the rocky spurs, and entered what was to all appearances a pass, though Buckskin called it a coulie, which might stand for a deep ravine, or a gulch, differing from the dry bed of a former stream which is known as a barranca.

"Do we leave the ponies here, Uncle?" asked Frank, who had come to call Mr. Witherspoon thus familiarly, though of course the gentleman was no relation, being connected on the side of Andy's mother.

"Yes, staking them out where they can get a bite to eat from that grass yonder, while we're gone. We gave them all the water they could drink a short time back; and that'll have to do until we start home. Going to snap us off again while we stand here beside our mounts, are you, Andy?" and the rancher, who by this, had found himself taken in a dozen different attitudes, and was getting used to it, laughed good-naturedly as he struck a natural pose, with one hand stroking the neck of his cayuse.

"Oh! it's all over with," replied Andy, coolly, "I saw my chance, and just pressed the bulb

when nobody was looking. And I bet you I got a good one, too. That's always the best way to do. When people think they're getting in a picture they make all sorts of queer faces trying to look nice, and it spoils things. But the next one I hope will be of Mr. Grizzly, and say, Uncle, we won't have to tell him to look pleasant, will we?"

"Oh! I've no doubt but that when he knows what you're after he'll just rear up on his hind legs, and grin like a booby," chuckled Frank. "I guess these grizzlies don't often get a chance to have their pictures taken, and he'll be obliged to you for the opening. I hope you get a good one, that's all, Andy."

They threw themselves down to rest.

"No hurry about getting to work," said Mr. Witherspoon, as he lighted his pipe, from which he seemed capable of sucking considerable enjoyment. "We might as well take it easy for a little, while Buckskin is skirmishing around, to see if he can locate signs of our four-footed friend up yonder among the rocks. An hour at this time of day won't matter much anyhow, because chances are the old rascal is sleeping off the effects of the big dinner he made last night off another of my heifers, so the foreman reported."

The boys were not unwilling, because the ride had been hot and dusty; and just there the air seemed stirring a little, which made the shade very agreeable, after the open glare of the bright sun.

"But suppose the bear should happen along here after we've gone, and take a notion to tackle one of your ponies, Uncle, wouldn't that be a pretty tough joke on us, if we had to go back double?" remarked Andy, as he pottered with his camera, to make sure that it was in the very best of condition for the work he expected to put it to presently, if they were lucky enough to come across Bruin.

"Well, you are the greatest hand to think up trouble I ever saw, my lad," declared the free and easy-going rancher, "that never occurred to me at all, and I don't believe there's one chance in ten of it coming to pass, because all respectable bears should be asleep in their dens at this hot time of day. I reckon then we'll have to risk it, unless one of you boys choose to sit here and stand guard."

Of course this was said in the light of a joke, because he knew full well neither of them could be induced to lose this glorious chance to see a real grizzly of the Rockies at home.

Frank wanted to do a little of the shooting,

if possible; and as for Andy, he had become so thoroughly infatuated with the business of picture taking that if he were compelled to choose between snapping off the bear's likeness, or putting a chunk of lead between his ribs, Frank believed he would take the former, and lose all opportunity for securing the trophy of the chase for a rug.

They were still lounging there some time later when a rattling of small stones announced that somebody or some thing was approaching from up the side of the coulie. Mr. Witherspoon just allowed his hand to creep out to where his repeating Marlin lay. Not that he suspected any danger might be hanging over their heads; but then one wants to be on the foothills of the Rockies, where grizzlies have their dens and sometimes cattle rustlers hide out waiting for a chance to descend on the unprotected herds, which may be driven away to a secret cache, where their marks can be altered, and then the animals sold, or shipped on the raiload to a distant point.

But it turned out to be Buckskin, and with a wide grin decorating his bronzed face, which Frank rightly interpreted to signify that he had found the den he was so positive must be near by.

"Hit her the first thing, boys," he chirped cheerfully, as he threw himself down alongside the others, to cool off a little. "And believe me, things look good for findin' our chap at home. He dragged that heifer all the way up here, consarn his old hide. I could see marks of blood on his doorsill. Reckons as how we ketched him next door to in the act, Mr. Witherspoon; got him with the goods on, we have. And here's hopin' that'll be the last young beef he'll steal from the Double X Ranch."

After a short time the rancher got up, and threw his rifle in the hollow of his arm. While lying there he had told the boys about all that he could remember concerning the habits and peculiarities of grizzlies, and also warned them not to be sparing of their lead when once they commenced to throw it; because there is not another living wild beast, hunters declare, that can stand up under and carry off more bullets than one of these monsters.

The four of them commenced to climb the rocky slope. It was no easy task, but they took their time about it, Mr. Witherspoon pointing out how Buckskin had undoubtedly followed the occasional traces left by the bear in his many pilgrimages along the same route—scratches from his terribly long claws; or it

might be occasional tiny stains of blood from the carcass of the heifer he had dragged all the way from the grass country, and along these ragged rocks, just as though it was the easiest proposition that had ever been put up to him.

"Thar she is!" said Buckskin, suddenly, pointing with his rifle.

Following the direction of his outstretched weapon, the boys saw what seemed to be a seam in the face of the rocky wall a little distance away. As they advanced still further they realized that it widened near the base, and afforded quite an opening, through which even the bulky figure of a grizzly could pass with ease.

And upon looking, they found innumerable evidences of the fact that some animal had long been in the habit of passing in and out of this fissure.

"Why, here's a bunch of brown hairs sticking to this sharp point of rock, rubbed off when he scraped past!" declared the keen-eyed Frank immediately after taking a look around.

"Good for you, my boy!" exclaimed the rancher, evidently well pleased at this evidence of alertness on the part of his charge. "Yes, that came from the hide of a Mountain Charlie, as they call them out in California. You can

see how coarse it is. Keep it as a memento; but I certain sure hope you'll get the real thing before we gallop back for our supper late to-night."

"How about him rushing out and surprising us, Uncle?" asked Andy. "Perhaps the old fellow mightn't like to have company dropping in on him without an invite. And then, you see, I wouldn't have any focus at all, which would spoil my picture."

"No need of worrying about that, my lad," said the rancher. "He's lying in there as snug as you please, with his stomach full of that juicy heifer; and it'll be a hard proposition for us to coax him to consent to an interview at all. Chances are, Buckskin'll have to smoke the old villain out. That sometimes happens. But we might as well begin to make all our arrangements, looking to getting that picture at the right focus; and also placing that little defile between us and the bear when he does come out, mad as hops at being treated to a smoke."

He had apparently already figured it all out in his own mind and made the necessary arrangements; for he led them across a deep little defile that happened to lie between the bear's den and a flat stretch of rock, just fifty paces away.

From this spot a splendid view could be had

of the yawning crevice at the base of the cliff. And Andy was delighted to see that for the next hour the sun would be favorable to his work of securing a good exposure, given the subject.

"Got your focus all right, have you?" asked the rancher, when he heard Andy give a grunt as of satisfaction.

"Yes," Andy went on to say, smilingly, "everything stands out as clear as a bell; and I think I ought to make a boss picture of this; that is, if I don't go and foozle, because of stage fright, when the old rascal comes roaring out to ask what we want. You won't shoot in too big a hurry, I hope; give me time to snap off a couple, for fear one might be spoiled. These sort of chances come only once in a life time you know; and ought to be doubled up, to make sure."

"Well, if we're all ready here, perhaps you'd better get busy, Buckskin, and see if you can bring him out with a few cowboy yells. If that fails, then there's some wood over yonder you can use; and I notice that you grabbed up some stink-weed as you came along, which will fetch him dead sure, when it gets to smouldering. Sometimes I even think it would bring a dead man to life, it's that powerful. We'll leave this little log across the gully, just as we used

it to cross on; when you jump over for keeps give the same a kick; and that'll put a gap between, the old man can't cross in a hurry, if so be he fails to drop under our fire."

Accordingly Buckskin trailing his gun along after him, crossed on the aforesaid log that served as a bridge over the gully, and went about his business of trying to coax the occupant of the rocky bear's den to come out, with just as much indifference as though he were obeying the call of the range to dinner, when the cook pounded on a big frying pan with a basting spoon.

And standing there, the boys and Mr. Witherspoon awaited developments with varied emotions.

CHAPTER XII

THE DEFENSE OF THE LOG BRIDGE

"Listen to Buckskin calling him all sorts of names, would you?" exclaimed Andy, a few minutes later.

"If that bear only understood half he's been called, he just couldn't stand it a minute longer," declared Mr. Witherspoon, chuckling, "but the poor old chap's education has been neglected, so he doesn't know cowboy lingo. I reckon he never even opens one eye, but keeps dozing right along. He hasn't lost any cowboy, and so he doesn't want to be bothered. No good, is it, Buckskin?"

"Don't look that way, sir," replied the other, disconsolately, "that's the trouble with not having the gift of gab. Now, if I was as good a hand at callin' names, and rattling off the lingo as Puffer Pete, chances are he'd just have to show a leg. Well, here's to open up a little smoke spell with the boss."

Accordingly, he bent over, and seemed to be fixing the small tinder he had carried across with him. Now and then he would turn his head and call out something or other to the boys,

as though explaining to the boys what he was doing.

"Now she's all ready for biz," he finally declared, "watch my smoke, fellers. Hi! here's looking to you, old man; you've just got to wake up, and let us take a look at your mug, you know. There she goes! Whoop-la!"

The watchers saw a wisp of smoke creep up lazily. There did not seem to be any wind to carry it away; and presently it met a back draught, for it appeared to be sucked directly into the yawning crevice at the base of the cliff.

Larger grew the volume of smoke, until quite a good-sized column was oozing out of the brush Buckskin had piled up.

"Now for the scent weed!" he called out.

They saw him carefully place some of this on top of the pile, and toward the back where its odor would be sure to be wafted into the den, with the smoke from the burning wood.

"Wow! that's fierce!" Buckskin whooped, grabbing hold of his nose with the fingers of his free hand, for he was holding fast to his gun all this time, not knowing when he might have to use it.

Now he was bending down as though listening to catch the first low growl to indicate that Bruin had awakened, and was sniffing at the smoke.

Buckskin's attitude told how he was holding himself in readiness for a lively sprint, just as soon as the signs warned him that the bear was rushing for the exit of the den in a terrible rage at being interrupted in his nap. No sensible cowboy ever wants to come to close grips with an enraged grizzly; he knows too much to risk a terrible death in that way.

It was a period of most intense suspense to both the boys.

All at once they saw the crouching cowboy galvanized into life. He leaped to his feet, and made a lively streak for the little log crossing the gap. No need to ask what induced his haste, for actions spoke louder than words in that case.

"Ready, Andy!" Mr. Witherspoon was heard to say, hoarsely.

This thing of attacking a full-grown grizzly in his native haunts was no child's play; and even so old a hunter as the owner of Double X Ranch doubtless felt more than a little thrill as he watched to see the head of the monster thrust out of the hole in the wall.

Andy had his kodak on a line with that opening and was crouching there ready to get in some good work. Let Frank have the glory of shooting the bear if he wanted; as for him, he found

more solid satisfaction nowadays in getting snapshots of game, than in trying to lay them low.

"Oh!"

It was Andy who gave utterance to this cry. A great dun-colored bulk had rushed directly across the heap of smoking fire-stuff, scattering it to the right, and to the left, as he gave a fearful roar that made the echoes ring.

And right then and there Andy pressed the bulb. He believed he had caught the bear just in the act of throwing the fire every-which-way, as Andy himself expressed it later on.

Immediately he started to turn the film so as to bring around a new and unexposed section. His fingers were quivering with eagerness and nervousness, so that he could hardly hold the camera.

"Steady, Andy; brace up, and take your time!" said Frank, who gave his chum one quick glance to see how near he was to getting in a second snapshot before he and Mr. Witherspoon started to firing.

That seemed to bring Andy to his senses, and the next moment he managed to get his second shot at the bear.

By this time the animal had discovered the running Buckskin, and immediately started in

hot pursuit, as if recognizing the human agency that had made his eyes smart so with that pungent smoke; there was now no longer any trouble about arousing the bear's fury; and Frank realized just why Buckskin, wise fellow that he was, had lost not a second about getting started, when he knew the bear was coming.

He cast one glance over his shoulder as he reached the end of the little log. Discovering the grizzly shuffling along swiftly in his wake, snorting with anger, the cowboy immediately started across the rude bridge. Once he slipped, and for a second or two it looked as though he would drop down twenty feet or more into the gully; but by a desperate effort Buckskin managed to climb up again, and mostly on hands and knees completed the passage.

The bear was still coming on, apparently in no wise daunted by the hot fire that was being poured into him by Frank and Mr. Witherspoon. Every shot Frank took he fully expected to see the huge beast go tumbling over; but in spite of all, the bear kept rushing after Buckskin. Andy was still working his kodak and taking more pictures.

Just as soon as the cowboy managed to crawl upon solid rock he started to dislodge the log. It proved a little more difficult than had been

expected. Three times did Buckskin make the effort, and only succeeded in moving the end a few inches on every occasion.

With the bear still coming on, as though capable of standing a hurricane of lead, it began to look serious enough. Should he ever succeed in crossing that log what might not happen to the hunters? Frank felt a cold chill creep over him as he contemplated such a possibility, and realized that the magazine in his Marlin heavy-bore was getting low.

Well, Andy came to the rescue just in time. Dropping his kodak, he sprang to the side of the panting Buckskin.

"Now, together!" he exclaimed, as he took hold of the end of the log.

It slipped from its anchorage just as the grizzly reached the opposite bank. Had they been three seconds later they must have hurled the shaggy monster down with the queer log bridge.

Bruin stopped in his mad advance just in time. He sniffed at the spot where the end of the log had rested, as though wondering how the human enemy could have apparently flown across.

This gave the marksmen a better chance to place their bullets where they were more apt

to count. Frank took deliberate aim back of the foreleg. At the same time he was conscious of a feeling of great respect for this brave old fellow, whom nothing could apparently daunt. But they had put their hand to the plow, and there could be no turning back at this late hour. Besides, this beast was bound to be a constant menace to ranchman's herds from this time on, now that he had learned the secret of securing an easy breakfast from the weaker elements of the cattle drove; and it was of the greatest importance that he be exterminated.

This time when Frank pulled the trigger of his Marlin he saw that he had at last reached a vital organ. The big bear actually weakened and fell over, though still struggling hard to keep on his feet and show a grim front.

"That did for him, Frank; no use to waste any more ammunition!" declared Mr. Witherspoon.

"Well, that was my last shot, anyway, so I couldn't do anything more until I'd recharged the magazine of my gun," remarked Frank.

"And unless I'm mistaken, my weapon is in just the same fix," chuckled the other, "so you can understand what a lot of lead a grizzly can digest before knuckling under."

"There, the old critter has keeled over, and

that's his last kick," remarked Buckskin, who was still panting from his recent exertions. "Say, Andy, d'ye want me to snap one off with you and Frank standing by the game? Seems to me you had ought to be seen in some of these here pictures. Reckon I know enough to aim, after you do the focus act, and squeeze that rubber thing."

"But we've got to cross over first, and our bully old bridge is down at the bottom of the hole," expostulated Andy.

"Oh! here's another log that will answer just as well," remarked the ranger, "just looks like these trees once grew here to accommodate anyone who wanted to use a log for a bridge. Everybody take hold, and we'll soon have it across."

After some trying they managed to get the log on end near the edge of the gap. It was no trouble, then, to let it fall directly across, and as they had calculated rightly, there was another means of spanning the gulf.

So, one after another, they walked across; in fact Andy and Buckskin were so anxious to see what the grizzly looked like, that they neglected to go back and pick up their guns, which they had carelessly dropped at the time their help was needed in order to move the log.

Andy insisted that Uncle Jethro also line up alongside the dead grizzly.

"You helped knock him out, and ought to be here more than me," he declared, when the rancher showed signs of holding back; and so finally the three were grouped in a manner to allow of the game being shown, while the hunters also appeared in the picture.

After Andy had arranged this to suit him, he gave the camera into the charge of Buckskin, and then went over to take his place alongside Frank and the ranchman.

"Now, look in the finder, and see that you've got the bear in the middle of the picture," Andy sang out. "How about it, Buckskin?"

"She's all right, Andy; tell me when to give the punch," came the reply.

"Be sure and hold the camera steady as a rock when you're going to squeeze the bulb. Now, let her go, Gallagher!" and Andy assumed a pose as he spoke.

Immediately after there was a whoop.

"Right there with the goods, and a regular bull's-eye at that!" shouted Buckskin. "I'm the boss boy with the picture machine, let me tell you. You see if that ain't a family group to do you proud! Want any more took, Andy? Just you warble the word and Buckskin, he'll

try to accommerdate you all that's a-goin'; sure he will. How about standin' the bar up on his hind legs and take him that way! Wow! holy smoke! look what's comin' in on us, would you? Another bar, and bigger nor this un at that? Must be the mate o' our game, and lookin' kinder mad at us. Whar's my gun? What in creation did I do with that six-shot pepper box? Run boys, he's chargin' us!"

CHAPTER XIII

NEVER-TO-BE-FORGOTTEN DAYS

Things started in happening about that time. And conditions could hardly have been much worse; for while Frank and Mr. Witherspoon had their rifles along, the magazines had been exhausted in their recent shooting affair; while the only two serviceable guns lay on the other side of the little gulf that was spanned by the log.

"Get to the bridge as fast as you can!' called out the ranchman, with a ring of authority in his voice.

It might have been noticed that Andy did not wait this time to complain about the "focus," and all that sort of thing; in fact, he simply ran for the avenue of escape without once looking around him. And both Frank and Mr. Witherspoon kept him pretty close company.

Buckskin had been close to the bridge himself at the time of his making that astonishing discovery; and hence he was already passing over. As a cowboy is not so sure-footed as a good many people accustomed to walking, there were times when it began to look as though he might lose

his grip again, and be compelled to resort to the original method of using his hands and knees.

"Don't let my kodak drop, Buckskin!" shrieked Andy, really more concerned about the safety of his little camera just then than his own safety.

Perhaps his outcry did have some steadying effect upon the other, for he managed to get to the opposite side without having to descend to any humiliating experience, but it was a close shave.

And now the boys understood just why Buckskin had made such mad haste. It was not because he meant to forsake them, or was so tremendously alarmed regarding his own condition. He had suddenly remembered that the guns that were charged had been left across on the other side, and somebody must charge that bridge in order to lay hands on them.

It was doubtless very fortunate for all concerned that the second grizzly did not see fit to charge as ferociously as had its dead mate; for in such a case the chances were they must have been mixed up with those long, cruel claws before the lot of them could cross over.

The newcomer stopped to sniff at the body of the other animal too, and this delayed things for a few seconds; just enough for them to get

safely over, and for history to repeat itself in so far as hurling the log into the hole was concerned.

Already Buckskin was getting busy with his repeater; and Andy, not to be left in the lurch, also scrambled over to where his gun lay.

Once more the battle was resumed, with all the odds on the side of those who, safe from the claws of the monster could at the same time send their little leaden messengers of death across the gulf, and into the body of the grizzly.

It hardly seemed fair, and yet what else can be done when dealing with such a terrible beast? Three men, yes, half a dozen, would not be too many to meet so ferocious a fighter at close quarters; and in order to win out, it is necessary to take advantage of every opening.

Rendered furious because of his wounds, and his inability to get at the objects of his hatred, the bear finally rushed straight at them, and of course toppled over the edge into the gap.

Meanwhile Mr. Witherspoon and Frank were getting fresh cartridges into the magazines of their guns as fast as their trembling hands could accomplish the feat. No one could tell how many shots might be found necessary before the tenacious life of the monster was snuffed out.

"He's dropped in!" shouted Andy, who had managed to discharge his gun twice, and seemed to feel that he had had something more or less to do with this last queer action on the part of the charging bear.

"Look out for him climbing up the side!" cried the rancher, doing his level best to get his weapon in serviceable condition.

"No danger, boss!" whooped Buckskin, who, down on hands and knees beside the edge of the gully, was trying to figure out what the condition of the bear might be, "he's gone and cashed his checks in this time, and we done it all by ourselves, sure we did, Andy. Say, wasn't he a whopper, now? And let's get ready in case there happens to be a whole menagerie of the varmints around these diggings."

After their guns had been placed in serviceable condition they crept to the edge of the little gulch and surveyed the huddled-up mass of hair, each declaring it to be his positive belief that the bear must be dead.

"Let's some of us go down to him!" cried Frank.

"You bet we will," echoed Andy; "I want that bearskin the worst kind, because, unless I'm greatly off my guess, there are just three holes in the same that my bullets made. How

can we do it, Uncle Jethro. Please put us wise."

The rancher knew easily enough how it could be done. He even volunteered to be the one who should drop down and secure the pelt of the dead bear. It was finally arranged, however, that Buckskin should do this business while Mr. Witherspoon performed the same kind of operation in connection with the first victim.

"Just to think of bagging two bears on the same afternoon!" exclaimed the proud Andy, as he danced around, trying the best he knew how to get some sort of picture of his own prize, for the cowboy loudly declared that it must have been a bullet from Andy's gun that did the business.

"It's so dark and gloomy down there, you see," he complained, as Buckskin hunted for a way to clamber down. "If only I had thought to fetch along one of my flash-light cartridges now, I could do it; or have him take me standing with my foot on the prize, and my trusty gun in my hands. But that's all off."

"What's to hinder me taking you in that position with the other bear?" ventured Frank; "we could slew it around a little, so that it wouldn't look the same as in the first picture; and having two skins would prove that we got that many bears."

So Andy finally consented to pose, and accordingly had his picture taken in the conventional attitude of saying: "Look what a big hunter I am?"

It required considerable time to remove the two hides; but then cowboys know how to go about it, and Mr. Witherspoon was also handy with the hunting knife; so that in the end it was accomplished.

As the afternoon was still pretty warm, they decided to rest again. At the request of Andy the puncher got several pieces of wood that might be made to serve in lieu of torches; and with these they explored the interior of the bear's den. There was quite a heap of bones inside the hole, and once more Andy deplored his want of forethought in not providing himself with a number of those convenient flash-light affairs, by means of which interiors may be photographed so well.

"You don't find me ever going anywhere with my old kodak, without thinking about having a light along," he complained. "Just when you think you won't need such a thing, the greatest chance you ever saw happens along and makes you feel sick. Why, I don't know what I wouldn't give to have a chance to take a picture of a real bear's den like that."

Buckskin thereupon consoled him with the promise to ride over another day, amply provided with all the necessaries, if it so be Mr. Witherspoon allowed to let him off, which the generous ranchman readily agreed to do, because he would have consented to almost anything if it would add to the pleasure of this nephew in whom he was taking such unusual interest.

When the sun had dropped low enough so that its heat was not depressing, they started back home, taking things easily by the way.

Their mounts had been rested, and besides, knew which way they were now heading, and could be depended on to keep doggedly at work, without any "sojering," or trying to "play lame," as some smart cow ponies have been known to do when not in the humor for work.

The moon gave them light when night came on, and by ten o'clock they reached the ranch buildings. Expecting them at about this time, Charley Woo had a splendid supper all ready, to which the tired boys did ample justice.

But the story of the hunt was reserved for the morrow; because Mr. Witherspoon saw that the others were ready to drop after all those hours in the saddle, added to the nervous excitement of that thrilling bear hunt.

It was now drawing close to the time when the regular fall round-up was scheduled to come off; for Mr. Witherspoon was one of those careful ranchmen who did not let things get too far ahead of him; and he wanted to know what his herds had been doing for him doing the summer season, so that all youngsters might be given the brand that would stamp them as his property.

Although both Frank and Andy had witnessed the operation on smaller scales several times, so that the novelty had in a measure worn off, still they laid out to accompany the band when they went forth in full strength to cover the range, and be away several days and nights at least.

Andy, of course, wanted to secure a few more striking pictures that would illustrate the stories they wished to tell upon reaching home again. The only thing he deplored was the fact that his stock of films was running very low; he had been too lavish in the beginning, not leaving enough for the more important subjects apt to crowd up later.

But he had developed the roll containing the bear scenes, and was as he admitted "tickled nearly to death" with the splendid results. Why, it looked just as if that fierce old denizen of the cleft in the rock was roaring out his anger

and defiance as he threw the fire sticks in every direction; and as for the other one, with Buckskin crawling along the log bridge, and the grizzly galloping down toward the end of the same, the cowboy declared that he could almost hear himself saying bad words because of his dizzy head, that always played him false in an emergency like this.

Why, a whole month had slipped away since their arrival at the ranch; and in a few more weeks they would have to be thinking of getting ready to travel back to Bloomsbury and school! Every time they talked of it the boys felt blue; not that Frank and Andy did not want to see the dear ones at home; but they were certainly having the time of their lives down here in Arizona, and hated to leave until they had utterly exhausted the mine of pleasures that awaited their attention on every hand.

Uncle Jethro was kindness itself. He never wearied of thinking up all sorts of things that he believed the two Bird boys would enjoy; and when he could not accompany them in person, he sent Buckskin instead; so that they came to have a decided fancy for the odd little "sawed off" of a cowboy, as he himself described his lack of stature.

And so it came about that one night the

ranchman remarked that all preparations had been made to start on the following day on the round-up; the various herds would be ready for their inspection; and before they came back doubtless every part of the wide-spreading territory contained in Double X Ranch would have been raked over as with a fine-tooth comb, looking for mavericks and stray bunches.

CHAPTER XIV

OFF FOR THE ROUND-UP

"Phew! it looks like another hot day, Frank!"

Andy had just dressed, and gone to the window to look out. The sun was already up, and had that queer, dark red glow that betokens an unusual display of heat. It would be a hard day for the long ride across the treeless level stretching out between the ranch buildings and the grassy valleys where the cattle generally bunched at this time of year.

Frank had been strangely silent while dressing; and as he now joined his cousin at the window, Andy noticed for the first time that he was looking rather "peaked."

"Here, what's the matter with you, old fellow?" he asked, with his customary breezy impulsiveness. "You don't seem a bit tickled over the idea of spending a whole day in the saddle, and that's a fact."

"Well," replied the other, with a little smile, "the fact is, Andy, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you."

"How's that?" demanded his cousin, aggressively.

"I don't think I'd better try going today, and that's a fact," Frank went on.

"Are you sick? Is that what ails you? Seemed to me you kicked around a whole lot last night, now I come to think of it. Why, didn't you call me up, Frank? What's the matter? I just bet the heat was too much for you yesterday. We shouldn't have done that long ride on so nasty a day; felt like I was drawn through a straw myself, though I'm all right now. But do you really mean that you won't ride out today with the boys?"

"The way I feel now, it would be silly for me to try it," Frank continued, with a little shake of his head. "I seem to be dizzy, and to sit on the back of a lively pony for even an hour would upset me like everything."

"That's a shame now, ain't it, Frank?"

"Oh! I don't mind it so very much. You'll only be gone a couple or three days at the most; and I'll have Mrs. Ogden, Charley Woo, and little Becky to keep me company. And then, if I'm feeling myself by tomorrow, why I might take a notion to look you boys up by the air route. Don't worry about me, Andy."

"I don't mean to, because I expect to stay with you and see that you get the right kind of

care," said Andy, with his positive face in evidence.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," retorted Frank. "I'll be in good hands, and the chances are will be all right by noon. So you're just going along with Uncle and the rest."

"I'd like to see anybody make me when I put my foot down," Andy went on to say. "The fact of the matter is, Frank, between you and me and the lamp-post, when I found out what sort of a scorcher we were in for today, I began to lose some of my own enthusiasm. Sure I'd have gone along if you were all right, and taken my medicine as well as I could; but this alkali dust don't please me a whit; and on a red hot day it's a lot of a nuisance to have to keep on riding in a saddle on such a slow thing as a cayuse."

"Oh! you're spoiled by this mile-a-minute gait of your air steed, that's plain," chuckled Frank, "but your uncle will be disappointed if you don't go along, Andy."

"He'll have to be, then," returned the other steadily, as though his mind was made up, and nothing could change it. "I don't pretend to be able to keep up with Buckskin, Shorty and all that lot of hard riders. They can wear me to a frazzle in the long run. My place,

where I shine, is with you in a biplane. There you don't have to work your way, but just sit and enjoy the grandest view any fellow ever had spread out before him, while's he spinning along at much more than a mile-a-minute speed. The air route for mine, every time."

"Well, I see there's no use trying to force you to go; but I'm sorry that this has happened, Andy."

"Shucks! don't you bother your head about me," his cousin said, with a chuckle. "Fact is, I'm rather tickled at finding an excuse for backing down without its looking that I'm showing the white feather. That thought of three days in the saddle, with the heat and dust gave me a bad feeling. And Frank, perhaps we might look the boys and their chuck wagon up tomorrow in our biplane. That's a heap sight more to my fancy, let me tell you, now."

"All right, Andy. But there's your uncle outside, looking after things. We'd better see him, and let him know, before he gets ponies ready for us."

Both boys went outside, and when Mr. Witherspoon heard about Frank's sickness he expressed the greatest concern. After hearing the symptoms he agreed with Andy that it must have been the extreme heat of the pre-

ceding day that had knocked his cousin out.

"Nothing serious at all," announced the ranchman, "I've felt the same way myself more than a few times, after unusual heat, and hard riding. No use trying to keep in the saddle when you've got that dizzy spell; just lie down, and Mrs. Ogden 'll give you a dose of the same medicine that always brings me around. Chances are you'll be feeling all right by noon, or before night, anyway."

"We feel sorry not to be able to go along with you on the round-up, Uncle," remarked Andy.

"I'd put off starting until tomorrow, boys, only all preparations have been made and it would interfere with our work more or less," the ranchman went on to say with a tinge of regret in his voice, as though he were tempted to do this at any cost.

"We wouldn't think of letting you do such a thing, sir!" exclaimed Frank.

"And besides," added his cousin, "if Frank is all right tomorrow, you may see us sailing along to hunt you up, and with a map of the whole ranch spread out before us."

"You mean you'll take a spin in your biplane, is that it, boys?" Mr. Witherspoon went on, "Good! Nothing would please us better.

I can imagine the antics of the cattle when they see a great bird settling down over them."

"Oh! we'll be careful, and try and not start a stampede, Uncle; if we do come, after we've located where you're working at the time, we'll drop down some distance away, and walk over; or you can send mounts for us. But I don't care to go without Frank, you see. And to tell the honest truth, I'm a bit leery about riding through such a scorching hot day as this promises to be."

"Perhaps you're wise, my boy," said the ranchman, reflectively, "it's hard enough on us old shellbacks, used to breathing this alkali dust from one end of the year to the other, and must be rough on tenderfeet. Make yourselves at home; the best is none too good for you. Charley Woo thinks you are a couple of little tin gods on wheels, and he'll do anything in the wide world for the wizards who can mount up to the clouds, and play tag there with the winds."

Frank, though looking badly, would not go in and lie down while the outfit was getting in readiness to start. He wanted to see all that went on, for the chance might never come to him again.

And Andy was busy snapping off several

pictures of the scene, as the bunch of active cow punchers galloped around on their ponies, making the animals do all sorts of wonderful feats as they curvetted and pranced, and snorted with the excitement.

"I've just got another film of a dozen exposures," he complained to Frank, after he had taken several views of the chuck wagon, and the string of led ponies that had to be taken along for service when the hard riding boys wore out their first mounts, "and with that I want to get my pictures of the round-up; also one of the dinner hour, when the entire crowd gathers around the chuck wagon."

"But how is it that Charley Woo doesn't go along this time; I thought he always did the cooking for the crowd when they went off like this?" Frank remarked.

"I asked Uncle about that, and he said that the boys had been complaining somewhat lately about the Chinaman's way of cooking. He thought they were just spoiled by having things too good; and to show them the difference he has arranged to let Shorty do the cooking on this trip. He used to, long ago, before Charley came along, and got the job."

"Oh! that's it; and the boys are in for a lesson, I can see. When they get a dose of

the old style of slinging hash together they 'll never have another word to say about Charley. That's the way things go, sometimes; you never miss the water until the well runs dry."

"Looks like they might be going to start right away, Frank. Here come the boys on the jump, to say goodbye, and hope you'll be feeling better soon."

"I hope they won't think I'm faking this headache, just to get out of riding on the round-up with them?" remarked Frank, uneasily.

"They know you better than that," returned his cousin. "Any fellow who has got the nerve to ride in an aeroplane would be equal to anything, so Buckskin and every one else swears. Try as we can, you know there isn't one of them dares go up. What Buckskin told them about his sensations has given the whole bunch cold feet so far as wanting to try a ride among the clouds. The earth, alkali dust and all, is good enough for them, they say. Hello! boys, hope you have a grand good time. And if Frank's feeling O. K., look for us along some time tomorrow. I want to get some cracker-jack pictures of how you round up the cattle, and brand the same, those that need the Double X mark."

Every puncher insisted on gripping the hand

of each of the Bird boys, while his restless pony danced, and snorted, and acted as though just wild to start off like a comet.

Then came Uncle Jethro and the foreman, Waldo Kline, to also shake hands, and say how sorry they felt at not having the visitors at the ranch along; but the boys again repeated their intention of looking in on the workers later on.

With a tremendous racket and waving of hats, the string started off, and Andy could not resist aiming his kodak after them, for the scene was an inspiring one, which he and Frank would never forget.

Further and further away drew the caravan, the mules hitched to the chuck wagon being kept on the trot by old Shorty, who had once again come into his own as cook for the outfit; yet wore a troubled look on his face, as though he felt uneasy concerning the outcome. For cow punchers are no respecters of persons when they feel that they have good cause for complaint concerning the quality of the grub with which they are being served; and Shorty had before then known of cooks being actually tarred and feathered just because they failed to come up to the expectations of the clamorous bunch of reckless cow men.

When they had vanished from sight far away over the plain, in a cloud of dust, Frank went in to lie down again; while Andy started to amuse himself developing some of the films he had just exposed.

And as the morning advanced it proved even a hotter day than the preceding one had been, so that Frank felt he had acted wisely in declining to take chances on so hard a gallop, with his head in such a whirl.

It was just before noon that Andy came into the room in somewhat of a state of excitement.

CHAPTER XV

THE ONE WHO CAME BACK

"Frank, do you remember what I did with the glasses?" asked Andy, after he had been looking all around for a minute or two, with a puzzled expression on his face.

Now, Andy was not quite so methodical as his cousin. He had on occasion been known to seem a bit careless, to confess the actual truth. And Frank, knowing how such a habit is apt to grow on anyone unless severely checked, sometimes played a little trick on his chum with the sole idea of impressing things upon his mind, and correcting this fault.

He raised his head at Andy's question.

"Stop and think, where did you have them last?" he remarked, quietly.

"Oh! say, didn't I fetch them in last night when we were all looking at the man in the moon, and those stars that Uncle Jethro said were the Belt of Orion the Hunter? I'm dead sure I did, Frank; but they don't seem to be around here. Do you know where they are? Has anybody borrowed our glasses, Frank? I want them right now, and I want them bad."

"Look on the table in the living room, and

I think you'll find them," returned Frank, sitting up. "I saw you drop them there last night, and just wanted to see if you'd remember to fetch them to our room. But what's up, Andy?"

"You seem to be, just now, old fellow; which I take it is a good sign you're feeling a whole lot better. Glad to know it, and that's straight. But about the glasses—why, there's a lone horseman coming along at a slow lope, as if he didn't care to hurry one little bit; and I'm wondering who it can be."

"Perhaps some neighboring rancher coming to ask a lot more fool questions about the cost of biplanes, and whether any puncher who has broken bronchos all his life could learn to herd cattle with one of these up-to-date fliers;" and Frank, getting up from the cot, started to stretch, as though he might indeed be feeling more like himself again, the dizzy feeling gone.

Andy chuckled at what his cousin said; then, being really curious to learn the identity of the approaching horseman, he hurried out of the room.

Frank followed leisurely, and on getting outside found the other with his eyes glued to the small end of the fine glasses, which had come in so useful dozens of times when the Bird

boys were whirring through the upper currents, and looking for a place below to land.

"Well, have you made him out?" asked Frank, coming up behind the other.

Andy took the glasses down as he replied:

"That's as easy as falling off a log, Frank; but I'm wondering what under the sun brings Alkali Joe back home again."

"Alkali Joe, you say, Andy; why, he went with the bunch this morning!"

"That's just what he did," the other went on to say, a little excitedly, "but all the same, that's Joe, as big as life. And if you notice, Frank, you'll think it queer that he doesn't act like they all do when in the saddle, making his pony go like the wind, and whirling his hat around his head."

"That's so, Andy, he doesn't," remarked Frank, when he had clapped the glasses to his eyes; "fact is, Joe acts like he might be going to a funeral. I never saw a cow puncher come jogging along like that, taking things as easy as he can."

"Gee! I hope he isn't bringing us any bad news!" exclaimed Andy.

"Well, now," Frank remarked, "I never thought of that; but what sort of bad news could Uncle Jethro be sending back; and even

that wouldn't be apt to keep down the bubbling spirits of an average cowboy."

"Then what do you think can be the matter?" went on the other.

"I rather believe that Joe has had some sort of attack, just like I did; and your uncle has sent him home to be dosed and to lie down, knowing that he'd never be able to keep his seat in the saddle during the wild dash of the round-up."

"Frank, I wonder if that could be so?" Andy observed, seriously. "P'raps it's going to be an epidemic and the whole of us may be down with the same, yet. Couldn't have been locoed by any of that weed they tell us about, could we? If the cows they use for milkers gobbled any of the same, would it affect us, do you think?"

That idea tickled Frank, for he laughed.

"I don't think we stand in any danger that way, Andy," he went on to remark, "but anyhow, you'll know about Joe pretty soon, for he's coming along on a steady lope, and will be here inside of ten minutes, at most."

They stood and watched the cow puncher swinging along at that easy gait; it seemed as though the man in the sheepskin chaps might be part and parcel with his pony they moved

with such a steady rhythm. And before the time limit which Frank had set expired he had come to a full stop before them.

But Frank had already made a discovery. This was to the effect that one of Joe's lower limbs seemed to be bound up with a rough bandage.

"What happened, Joe?" he asked, stepping forward to the side of the other, who seemed to have what might be called a sheepish grin on his sunburned face.

"I made a fool play, and got pitched over the head of my pony, when he stepped into a gopher hole. Broke a leg, that's all; reckons as how I orter broke my fool neck to even her up. Have to get you boys to help me off the hoss. Never knew that to happen before to a feller my size. Mr. Witherspoon, he did her up in fust class shape, and sez he, 'You get back to the ranch the best way you can, and the boys'll do what's needed, with the help of Mrs. Ogden. So if you'll jest give me a hand, mebbe I might hop inside the bunk house."

"No you don't," said impulsive Andy, instantly, "you'll go right in the main house. Guess I know what Uncle Jethro'd do if he was here. That bunk house may be all right for a well puncher, but with its noisy crowd it's no

place for a man with a broken leg. Now, rest your whole weight on us, Joe; we can stand it, all right. That's the way; hope it didn't hurt much when you dropped out of the saddle. Now, use us like you would a pair of crutches, and we'll get there, step by step."

The housekeeper and little Becky came running out just then, alarmed by seeing Alkali Joe, who was something of a favorite on the ranch, in dire straits. Even Charley Woo was solicitous about the comfort of the injured man, and hurried in with Mrs. Ogden to get a bed ready in the spare room.

After the boys had gotten the cow puncher in bed, Frank took a look at the way Mr. Witherspoon had bound up the broken leg.

"Why, your uncle must be a regular surgeon, Andy!" he declared, "that's as neat a job as I ever saw; and done while on the gallop, too, you might say. I take off my hat to Uncle Jethro, let me tell you right now."

"We all do that, Frank," said Joe, emphatically. "He's the most wonderful man in the whole country. There ain't a puncher that ever worked for him as wouldn't go through fire and flood for Mr. Witherspoon; well, I take that back, 'cause I reckon they has been one or two as he had to fire, and for mighty good rea-

sons, that'd like to see him lose all his stock through a norther, or else that Mexican cattle rustler."

Inside half an hour the injured man had been made as comfortable as possible; he himself said it was the greatest snap that had ever befallen him, and that he hadn't lain between soft white sheets since he was a kid at home in the East. Frank thought that old memories were being stirred in Joe's mind; perhaps, after all, his accident might work for his good, in that it would cause him to recollect that there was an old mother or father somewhere east of the Mississippi, whom he had almost forgotten, and who would be wild with joy if only a letter came from the boy who had gone away from home so many years ago, and in the excitement of his life in the Southwest shut out all thoughts of the past from his heart.

Frank and Andy after having lunch sat outside where the shadows were thickest at this sweltering time of day. There could always be found a gentle puff of air at this favorite place; and lounging in a hammock, while Andy worked at some of his prints, Frank watched a lone white cloud that was drifting across the azure sky above.

Perhaps his thoughts too were turning back

to other scenes as he lay there. It might be that the sight of that single fleecy fog-like vapor caused him to remember events that were connected with other scenes in the lively experiences which had come to the Bird boys while harnessing their chariot to the clouds.

"What you thinking about, Frank?" Andy asked, suddenly, after he had been watching the face of his cousin for a full minute without the other knowing it.

"Why, I was trying to picture rough Alkali Joe in the past," replied Frank. "What he said about not having slept between sheets since he was a kid, made me think. Did you see that picture that fell out of his pocket when we took off his Mexican jacket, the one he won at the raffle they told us about?"

"Sure I did; but that wasn't Joe's best girl, Frank; when I picked it up and put it back I saw that it was the face of an elderly woman."

"All the same it ought to be Joe's best girl; because I reckon it's his mother. And I remember him saying one day that he didn't know whether there was anybody alive in his family or not, because he hadn't written a letter home for six whole years. And Andy, I was just thinking, that while he's on his back there, it might be a good time to get talking to Joe,

and see if he wouldn't think to write. If his mother's alive still, I reckon she'd be happy to hear from him again."

"Frank, that's just like you for all the world; always wanting to do somebody a good turn. Now, that wouldn't have struck me at all; but since you've mentioned it, I'm going to watch my chance to get talking about home and all such things, and see if I can't wake Joe up. He's a good-hearted fellow, if he is tough. But by the way you're getting back to your old self, I think the chances look good for our making that start tomorrow in the biplane."

"It does look that way, if nothing happens between now and then to break up our plans," replied the other. "Doctor Witherspoon has certainly knocked that dizziness out of my system, and I'm as well as ever now. Fact is, there's a little job connected with the motor that ought to be attended to, to put it in first-class condition, and when the sun gets lower down, so that a fellow can breathe better, why I think I'll get busy."

"And me to help you," chirped Andy, promptly, "I'm about done with this printing business anyway. Say, what d'ye think of this lot of pictures? Don't it give you a cold chill just to look at that old grizzly scattering things

around at the mouth of his den? And every time I glimpse Buckskin hanging on to that log bridge with his fingers and teeth, trying to climb back again after losing his balance, it makes me shake all over, I want to laugh so hard. A pretty good lot all told, Frank."

"That's what they are; Andy, and the folks at home will have a fine time looking them over. You'll be able to illustrate nearly every big yarn you have to tell; and the round-up tomorrow ought to just fill out the bill. But I can make use of you, if you care to come over with me to the hangar. An air has started up, you notice, and it doesn't feel quite so hot," and accompanied by his cousin, after Andy had put his prints and trays away in the house, Frank sauntered leisurely over to where stood the new shed, which had been built to shelter the precious aeroplane wonder.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ALARMING DISCOVERY

Long before evening came on Frank had completed his work, and pronounced the aeroplane in as near perfect condition as it could be placed.

Andy had some more prints to worry over after supper, but it was a labor of love with him, and he never wearied of it. There was such a fascination about seeing the many well remembered scenes flash up before him, after he had dropped the paper in the tray holding his developing solution, and then carefully manipulating them so as to bring out the best possible results, that Frank declared he would have to drag him to bed later on.

They spent a very pleasant evening. Mrs. Ogden played the piano, and Frank was able to do some little execution with the violin which Mr. Witherspoon himself could manipulate so cleverly. Andy thumped on a banjo, and even sang a few college songs, such as the boys of Bloomsbury High delighted to learn in anticipation of the time when they would go away to Yale, Harvard, Cornell, or possibly Princeton, according to the mood that influenced them in making a choice.

When Charley Woo was discovered by little Becky crouching in the doorway and evidently enjoying the music, he was induced to bring a native Chinese instrument, fashioned after the manner of a mandolin from which he managed to extract some weird kind of music almost barbaric in its way, which added more or less to the enjoyment of the evening, and made the player superlatively happy.

As the door of the room where Alkali Joe lay upon his bed was kept open, so that he could enjoy the music, they heard him clapping his hands for some time after each air.

Purposely Frank influenced Mrs. Ogden to sing "Home, Sweet Home," with himself and Andy coming in on the chorus, as well as the sweet, bird-like tones of little Becky's voice. She gave promise of quite some talent in the line of music, and would carol half the day in her childish way.

And Frank listening heard no applause after they were through; instead, there was a dense silence beyond that open door, as though something about the song had touched the hardened heart of the cow puncher, and started him to thinking of things that had long banished from his mind.

Even Andy noticed the suggestive silence,

and catching the eye of his cousin, nodded his head in the direction of the room where the injured man lay, while he smiled, as much as to say:

"That was a center-shot, Frank; you hit the bull'seye that time, old fellow, and chances are that now he's got to thinking, Joe isn't going to be able to forget again in a hurry. You mark my words, there'll be a call for paper and pen inside of a day or two."

And sure enough, though there may be no further opportunity to mention the matter again, on account of other stirring scenes that await our attention, it can be stated right here and now that Alkali Joe did write a letter home before another forty-eight hours had expired. So that the little accident of his being pitched over the head of his pony when the animal stepped into a gopher hole, while going at a round pace, was the means of bringing joy to the heart of a grieving old mother in a far-away Eastern State.

Strange that not one of them noticed a face that was pressed close to the corner of the open sash of the window in the back of the room, from time to time, a dark scowling face that was marked by glittering eyes, which seemed to be

fastened on the little sprite of a girl whenever she danced across the floor.

No one dreamed of anything like danger, when the atmosphere seemed so calm and delightful. But then, that is the way things often go; and many times the gathering storm steals up unobserved, until there is a savage burst of thunder, accompanied by a vivid flash of lightning, startling every one by its sudden coming.

Finally Mrs. Ogden declared that the hour had grown late for little Becky to be up; and as was her custom, the winsome child went to each of the boys to kiss him goodnight.

After that Frank picked up a book, and interested himself in the story; while Andy, unable to tear himself away from his beloved camera work, started to print again, having another batch of proofs from which he had not as yet taken pictures.

The face at the window did not appear again after the housekeeper and little Becky left the living-room. It might be assumed from this that the spy without had lost all interest in the occupants when the child vanished from view.

Frank read on until he found his eyes growing heavy. Then with a yawn he tossed the book on the table.

"Ten o'clock, Andy," he remarked, as a gentle reminder.

"Oh! that isn't late," said the other, "you know, we go to bed at all hours at our house at home. A doctor never knows when he can get a night's sleep; and that breaks up things in his family more or less. But I'm on the home stretch with this batch of prints, Frank. Give me a little more time, won't you? When I get started with my trays and chemicals I like to clean up a lot of stuff."

"Ten minutes more," remarked Frank, grimly.

"Oh! well p'raps I can get through then; but even if I don't you might sneak off, and leave me to put out the glim when I am through," the other went on to say.

"Not if I know myself and I think I do, likewise you," chuckled Frank. "Why, you never would come to bed till long after midnight. It'd be just one more batch, and then another after that, to the wind-up. I'll wait for you, my boy. Ten minutes, and then we'll close up shop."

Andy knew that his cousin would stick to his word; he had been up against it more than a few times in the past, and so he hurried matters as much as he could. When the ten minutes

had expired he begged for five more, as grace, saying that he would just spoil the few prints that had to be finished if they were left in the washing water until morning; and so Frank gave in that far.

When they were undressing, later on, Frank thrust his head out of the window to look at the glory of the moonlight night, and wonder what the boys were doing in the round-up camp, just then.

The night was now cool and pleasant, as they frequently are after a hot day in Arizona, especially about the Fall season. Stars shone softly above, and there the moon hung like a big lantern, lighting up the earth below.

How many memories did it not recall to the Bird boys, every time they looked up and saw that great yellow shield! Had they not looked upon it under various periods of stress and peril in their own lives; sometimes near the home town, and again it might be far away in the mysterious country bordering the Magdalena river, down in Colombia, where the tropical sun shone far hotter than it did here in the Arizona regions.

Often the Bird boys were influenced to talk of these past experiences, when the mood came upon them; but Andy usually became more

or less excited whenever he was reminded of these stirring events; and tonight Frank wisely refrained from starting him going by mentioning the memories that were awakened by that lovely round orb.

The last thing he remembered Andy saying was that it promised to be a good day for the little air voyage they contemplated taking on the morrow; which caused Frank to chuckle, because in this arid country, where it seldom rained, all days were good ones, save as the heat or blowing alkali dust might bring discomfort in their train.

When Frank awoke again it was broad day. He no longer was troubled with that dizzy feeling; and yet it seemed to him as though a weight might be pressing down upon him. The air was unusually bracing on this particular morning, too, so that Frank did not know what to make of it.

Not being a boy given to such a things as the "blues," he shook himself with the intention of getting rid of this feeling and sternly put it out of his mind.

They went outdoors to take a look around, while waiting for Charley Woo to call them to breakfast. He was already up and doing, as the smoke from the kitchen chimney told.

Indeed, there was an unmistakable smell of cooking in the air that caused Andy to sniff eagerly, and remark:

"Tell me, don't that coffee smell fine; and as sure as you live, Charley Woo is going to give us a mess of his famous flapjacks, too. When we go away from here, Frank, we'll have to send that Chink something nice, to pay him for all he's done to make us happy while on the ranch. I really think Charlie'd lie awake all night hatching up some new mess to tickle us with. Uncle struck a treasure when that moon-eyed Celestial came wandering along here looking for a berth, when the tough punchers of the M-bar-M outfit chased him off because he let a hair from his queue get in the soup."

Presently the call came for breakfast, and the boys hurried in to attack the eggs and bacon and pancakes that were spread before them; together with butter, rolls, coffee, and genuine maple syrup, of which latter article the ranchman was very fond.

They wondered a little that Mrs. Ogden was not with them, but all the same proceeded to do full justice to Charley Woo's cooking. The grinning Chinaman waited on them with his customary agility, almost anticipating their

wants, and insisting on piling more flapjacks on their plates as fast as they were emptied, until both boys had to hold their hands over them and vow that they could not devour another one for love or money.

"Suppose you go and knock on Mrs. Ogden's door at the other end of the house, and tell her the cakes will get cold is she doesn't come quick," suggested Andy.

"Yes, I never knew her to be sleeping in so, since we've been here," added Frank, and yet as Charley Woo, who could make himself handy about the house in the capacity of a man of all work as well as chef, hurried off to carry out the suggestion, neither of the boys had the slightest suspicion that anything out of the way was the matter.

The first thing they knew about trouble was when they heard the Chinaman shouting in a wild fashion; and jumping up, regardless of the heavy meal they had just devoured, they ran through the passage to where the sound came from, their hearts almost standing still with sudden apprehension, they knew not what of.

The outer door of the two rooms which were occupied by the housekeeper and little blue-eyed Becky was open, and as Frank and Andy burst through impetuously, they saw Charley

Woo, trying to unwind some pieces of rope which had evidently been used to bind Mrs. Ogden to the bed posts. A towel with which she had possibly been gagged lay on the floor. The poor woman was in her wrapper, and so completely exhausted that she could hardly make a sound. But evidently she wanted to tell them something important, for her lips kept on moving; and Frank, bending down managed to catch the sense of the whispered sounds.

No wonder his face was white as he turned his head, and looked at his cousin.

"She says little Becky has been kidnapped!" was what he flung at Andy.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CARRYING OFF OF LITTLE BECKY

Andy fell back and stared at his cousin helplessly when he heard this startling announcement.

Meanwhile Frank had started in to assist Charley Woo cut the rope which had been so cruelly used to make the housekeeper a prisoner. Then he helped her to regain her feet, for she had sank down utterly exhausted as soon as released.

But Mrs. Ogden was a sensible woman, and she was trying the best she knew how to recover her speech; so that presently Frank thought it time to ask her something about what had happened.

"He must have crept in through the open window!" she gasped. "I thought the night wind had started blowing the blind, and got up to fix it, when he caught hold of me, and that was the last I knew until I came to my senses and found myself bound, and with a towel fastened across my face so that I could not cry out, when he was just passing out of the window. In the moonlight I could see that he held a bundle in his arms, and I knew what

it must be. Oh! what will Mr. Witherspoon say when he learns how I have let that sweet child be taken away from under my eyes."

That seemed to be the main cause for her distress; she thought nothing at all about her own sufferings, but was only concerned about what her employer would think because she had not been able to prevent the kidnapping of the child.

Though Andy had not yet recovered his voice, and was groping in the dark with regard to what it all meant, Frank, clearer visioned, had already made a pretty straight guess. He immediately started to ask a few questions, and each one of them went straight to the point.

"Did you see the man clearly, Mrs. Ogden?" he demanded; and somehow the housekeeper seemed to feel something of the same confidence in Frank that his manner nearly always produced in those who were in distress.

"No, because the moon was on the other side of the house," she replied; "and besides, he seemed to have some sort of bandanna handkerchief fastened around the lower part of his face as a disguise."

"And did he say anything that you heard, anything that would give you a clue with regard to who he was?" Frank went on to ask.

"I remember that when he first caught me by the throat he did utter a low word, and it was a Mexican word, too," she answered, slowly, as though her mind might not yet be working as clearly as usual.

"That is a point, then, to be remembered," the boy insisted, "and here's something that might give us another clue."

He picked an object up from the floor, and held it aloft.

"A Mexican sombrero!" exclaimed Andy, recovering his speech at last.

"Just what it is," said Frank, steadily, "and as is the habit with these men from over the border, this one is decorated heavily with silver beads, and gold buttons, as well as filigree work. One of these hats is worth a lot of money, and the owner is as proud of it as a lady would be of her magnificent diamonds at the opera. Please try and think, Mrs. Ogden, did you ever see this sombrero before?"

He held it up in front of her eyes, slowly turning it around, so that she might observe every part in turn.

The housekeeper uttered a low bubbling cry. Evidently the truth had flashed into her mind, and she was no longer groping in the dark.

"Yes, yes, I do remember seeing that hat, Frank, Andy!" she exclaimed.

"On the head of a certain gentleman who went by the name of Jose Sandero?" pursued the boy, as if trying to aid her memory.

"No other, though it was some years ago!" she cried. "They always decorate each new hat in the same way as the last. And when he was here that time to demand his child, only to hear that the court had given her into the keeping of Mr. Witherspoon, Jose Sandero wore just such a sombrero. Oh! it was him, all right; and the poor little darling has been carried off by her own unworthy father. He will make for the border as fast as horses can carry him, hoping to be safe beyond the line before the return of Mr. Witherspoon."

Frank had already guessed this much. It looked like a serious proposition; but then he was a boy not easily daunted. The more difficult the task the greater was Frank Bird's resolution apt to be aroused.

First of all it seemed essential that the ranchman must be notified of what had happened and that as quickly as possible. They were many miles away, and doubtless much valuable time would be lost, even after the messenger reached the round-up camp, since the boys

would be off here and there engaged in their work of gathering the cattle for the purpose of picking out unbranded stock, and driving it in to be marked, after it had been roped and thrown.

Meanwhile, it was necessary that they find out if possible which way the kidnapper had had gone; though the chances were ten to one the direction would be south. There were several reasons for believing this. In the first place Mexico lay in that quarter; and doubtless across the border Jose Sandero had prepared a hiding place where he could defy the United States courts to summon him. Perhaps he also had friends and comrades awaiting him there, who would defend him against any pursuit of the Double X Ranch cow punchers, bent on recovering the child and punishing the bold abductor.

Frank stepped over to the window, and looked out.

It happened that just below the earth was soft, for Mr. Witherspoon had made a brave effort to have certain flowering shrubs bloom near the house, and several pink oleanders and scarlet hibiscus did manage to survive the heat, being carefully watered each morning and evening by Charley Woo with his hose.

And looking closely Frank could see the mark of footprints. He climbed out of the window and began to follow them, Andy being quickly at his side, bubbling over with indignation and breathing all sorts of dire threats against the bad man who had for some reason other then affection chosen to steal the child to whom he no longer had any claim, selecting the very time when the punchers would be far away from the ranch house, which he had expected would be practically left unprotected.

Frank kept on following the tracks until finally he came to the now almost empty corral, where the riding horses were kept when the boys were at home.

"See," Frank observed, "here is where he had his pony tied—there were two of them, Andy, showing that he came here with the intention of carrying little Becky off."

"Yes," added Andy, "and now we ought to learn which way he went. But Frank, there's hardly a pony fit to ride except Alkali Joe's mount in the corral. They took every one along for use in the rough work of the round-up. Uncle says he will have to break in a lot more right away. They've been losing a large number lately, you remember. Heads into the south, don't it, Frank?"

"Yes, just as I thought it would," muttered the other coming to a stand, and looking away off over the level stretch of plain, as though he wished he had eyes strong enough to discover the fleeing marauder, miles and miles away though he must be before now.

"Poor little Becky, how frightened she must be to find herself being carried off by that man," remarked Andy, his voice trembling with feeling; and he had to stop speaking to grit his teeth, as anger almost overwhelmed him. "Of course he's told her before now that he is her father; but that won't make her feel any better, because she has heard enough from the boys to know that Jose is a bad man, who deserted her mother, and was in one way the cause of her death. Whatever do you suppose he did it for, Frank; not that he could care about Becky, who looks too much like her mother did to ever make him love her? More'n likely now, he's gone to all this trouble, and risked his neck in the bargain, just to get even with Uncle Jethro."

"I wouldn't be much surprised if you've hit the nail on the head, Andy," observed the other soberly. "But the question is, what are we going to do about it, for it seems to me

it's up to us pretty much to start something moving."

Andy suddenly looked up eagerly.

"Tell you what, Frank!" he exclaimed, "we've got something better than ponies to take us over the ground to where Uncle Jethro and the boys are at work. What's going to hinder us from making use of the biplane to cover these miles of space? Why, we can just whizz down there, and carry the news!"

Frank appeared to be thinking, for he did not make any remark in answer to this bright suggestion on the part of his chum.

"Look," Andy went on to remark, "if there isn't Alkali Joe hobbling around on one foot with a cane to support him. Chances are, he'll be asking us to let him ride for help, while we try and overtake the kidnapper; but that would be a terrible thing to let him do. Better send Charley Woo, if somebody has to go, and you don't want to waste time by using the machine."

"I was thinking why shouldn't we set out straight on the track of Jose, using the biplane instead of ponies?" Frank suddenly broke out with.

"Good! Great stunt! It does take you to think up things, Frank. There I kept on

beating about the bush, and saying we might carry the news to the boys, when all the time we had the opening before us to chase right after the skunk, hot-footed. And say, there's those fine Marlin guns we used on the bear hunt; couldn't we make out to carry a couple of that sort along with us, Frank? Oh! the way I feel right now, it wouldn't take much to tempt me to put a chunk of lead in that Mexican, I tell you. How about that, Frank; ain't we going armed, if we have to try and get our little ranch butterfly back again?"

"Of course, Andy; it would be silly to think of going without some sort of gun along. When you're meaning to arrest a bad man you had ought to make sure you're heeled so as to enforce your demands. We'll take shooting-irons along in numbers enough to riddle him if it comes to a question of a stand-up fight. And now's let's hurry back to the house. Before we can get off there are a few things we must see to, you understand."

"Then you don't think we had better run over to where the boys are, first of all, and let them know?" Andy went on to ask, loth to let his suggestion be wholly thrown into the discard.

"A waste of time, when everything is going

to depend on how fast we can overtake Jose and little Becky," Frank asserted, firmly. "We can start Charley Woo off; or if necessary, Mrs. Ogden, who can ride nearly as well as a man, will go. Come, the sooner we start in the quicker we'll be able to do something worth while."

And Andy, duly impressed once more with the fact that Frank was able to handle the situation, if any one could, only too gladly hurried after his cousin when the latter headed for the house.

No one paid the least attention to the fact that it was a fine airy morning, for the catastrophe which had come upon Double X Ranch so suddenly had by this time filled their minds to the exclusion of everything else.

And it was an excited group that gathered by the horse block in front of the door—the housekeeper wringing her hands in anguish; Frank and Andy looking very determined; Charley Woo in a flutter; and Alkali Joe furious because of his crippled condition.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AEROPLANE PURSUIT

"But ain't you a-goin' to let me ride over and tell the boss what's happened?" complained Alkali Joe, after Frank had in as few words as possible explained just what he and Andy meant to do; and while this was taking place his cousin had slipped into the house to secure the coveted guns, the value of which they knew only too well after that excitement over the bear hunt.

"You never could make it, Joe," said Mrs. Ogden decisively, "chances are you'd give that leg a wrench on the way, and just faint from the pain. Besides, it would be a crying shame to let a wounded man gallop all day long nearly, or even for a few hours. I'd sooner ride myself than let you try it."

"How about you, Charley Woo; can you ride a pony, and follow as plain a trail as the bunch left behind them?" asked Frank, turning to the Chinaman.

Charley Woo nodded his head so violently that his dangling queue looked like an animated rope hanging down his back. He removed his

hands with their long fingernails, from the wide sleeves of the jacket he wore.

"Sure tling, Flank!" he exclaimed eagerly, delighted it seemed to have such confidence reposed in him; "him know where Mistah Withasploon camp las' night; been samee place much many tlimes 'long with him. Go there light away, fast as Joe, he pony run. Tell when, that all."

Alkali opened his mouth to object to his favorite cayuse being ridden by another than himself, and a miserable "Chink" at that; then he shut his teeth hard together as he remembered what it all meant, and how foolish he would be to throw any obstacle in the way of the rescue of the little sunbeam that had been the idol of the ranch for some years now.

Frank himself hurried off to rope the pony in the corral. He had learned how to do this almost as well as any of the cow punchers themselves; and quickly made his reappearance leading the mount that had played havoc with his master's limb when he failed to detect the gopher hole in the trail. The little animal was showing all the signs of anger at being caught by anyone other than the master he acknowledged, but Frank had no time to waste, and had handled him without gloves.

Charley Woo did not seem to be one whit afraid because the pony snorted and tried to bite him when he approached. Watching his chance, when all was ready, the nimble Chinaman made a flying leap for the saddle that would have done credit to Alkali Joe himself. He had a quirt in his hand, secured by a stout buckskin thong to his wrist; and no sooner did he clutch the bridle than he brought this leather torment down upon the horse's heaving flank with a vicious smack.

At the same instant Frank released his grip, and away the pony flew, the huddled figure of the Chinaman dressed in his white, flapping garments, on his back, with his long queue flying out behind like a rope.

"He's headed straight to begin with," said Andy, with a sigh of relief.

"Charley Woo is all right," declared Frank, "and sooner or later he'll get to where Mr. Witherspoon is camped, to carry him the news."

"He will if that pony don't play some smart trick on him," muttered Alkali Joe, frowning, "You orter let me try it, Frank; I'm tough as knots, and I reckon I'd a-stood it."

"You get back to your bed as fast as you can, Joe," returned Frank. "Right now, perhaps you've put back the knitting of that bone,

and it may have to be set all over again when Mr. Witherspoon gets a chance to look at it. Come along, Andy, we've got our job laid out for us."

Joe still leaned against the hitching rail, and looked longingly after the Bird boys. From the gloom on his dark face, and the twitching of the muscles around his mouth, it could be plainly seen that the puncher was taking his misfortune with a bad grace; and that he thought himself the most badly used fellow inside of fifty miles; all because he had not been allowed to make that mad dash of twenty or more miles in a broiling sun, with a broken leg dangling uselessly at his side; and had to suffer the mortification of seeing a "heathen Chinee" gallop away on his pony. It must have been a cruel experience for Alkali Joe, and one that he would not soon forget either.

Meanwhile the two young aviators hurried over to the frame building that Mr. Witherspoon had had erected before their coming, and which was to be used as a hangar for their precious biplane.

"How lucky, Frank that you overhauled the motor only yesterday," remarked Andy, as they reached the wide doors of the shed which, upon being thrown open would allow

of the aeroplane being wheeled out to where they usually started off.

"I was just thinking that myself," replied the other.

"Just like you seemed to believe we might have a sudden call for service," went on Andy.

"Hardly that," Frank sent back over his shoulder, as he dove inside the building, "you know my maxim is to be ready always, for you never know when the emergency is going to jump out at you. These things nearly always drop down like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky."

"That's right, Frank. But there's nothing wrong here, is there?"

"Doesn't seem to be," and Frank, who had hurriedly moved about from one side of the aeroplane to the other, sighed with relief, and so loud that Andy heard him.

"But you were afraid there might be, own up now, Frank?" he exlaimed, quickly.

"Well, I didn't know but that Jose might have made his way in here last night and damaged the biplane. He sure would if he'd known how we could use it to chase after him, five times as fast as he could go on his pony. You know how easy it is to put such a thing out of commission, Andy. And Jose must

have been prowling about here while we were asleep."

"Wonder how it was Tige didn't scent him, and give him a chase?" remarked Andy, referring to the faithful watch dog that as a usual thing, played the part of sentinel over the ranch house, when the night grew old, and every inmate slept.

"Which reminds me that we haven't seen the old fellow this morning, Andy."

"Great governor! that's a fact!" exclaimed the other, excitedly. "Say, I wouldn't put it past that yellow-faced Mexican kidnapper to poison poor old Tige. When they come to look, chances are they'll find him lying stiff in his kennel."

"But we've got no time to talk that over now, Andy," said the other. "Lend a hand and we'll trundle the thing out to the starting place. Plenty of gasolene aboard, you know, because I filled the reserve tank yesterday, thank goodness. Here comes Mrs. Ogden with a package in her hand."

"Bet you I know what she's got!" exclaimed Andy; "thinks we might get lost somewhere out on the desert, and she's made us up a lot of grub to carry along. Wait till I look and see if there's plenty of water in that jug I

fixed to the back of the seat. Yes, brimful, I'll tie the guns here. Wait for me just three minutes, won't you, Frank? I'm going back to the house."

"What notion have you got in your head now, Andy?" demanded the other a little impatiently.

"We ought to have the glasses, you know," came back to him.

"You're right, and it was a good thing you thought of them," called Frank, only too well pleased to commend his chum for a thing of this kind.

Andy fairly ran at top speed toward the house, and plunged in through the open door, not wanting to waste a second more than could be helped. He was back again at the hangar before the time allowance he had given himself had expired; and so on arriving found that Frank had made all other preparation necessary, so that there was now nothing to prevent their immediate start.

"Oh! how I will pray that you get back our little darling safe and unharmed!" the housekeeper called out to them, as they were taking their places.

"Tell Mr. Witherspoon when you see him that we mean to do everything we can to bring

little Becky back home," Frank said, as his last words.

"And look up poor old Tige," called Andy, "just as like as not you'll have to bury him, because he must be dead; or else chased after the boys last night."

Frank gave the word; each of them had a part to do in the successful starting of the aeroplane; as the little motor burst into a merry song they found themselves commencing to move slowly along the level ground. Faster and faster grew the pace until Frank, deeming that the time had come to mount upward, changed the planes, and immediately the clever flier left the ground, rising gradually until he felt able to increase the speed, and climb upward in spirals.

The first thing that seemed advisable in Frank's mind was to get some sort of bird's-eye view of the surrounding country.

Of course he and Andy had done considerable moving about in all directions since first coming to Arizona, so that Frank already had a pretty fair knowledge of the vicinity. But with the glasses to help out, he hoped to be in a position to discover several things.

"Get busy, Andy, and see what you can glimpse," he remarked, after they had suc-

ceeded in mounting upward to a considerable distance.

"I've already sighted Charley Woo," replied the other.

"I hope then he's going right along," remarked Frank, anxiously, for his attention had to be confined almost exclusively to the working of the aeroplane, and on this account he must depend on his chum to tell him what was happening.

"Oh!" Andy hastened to reply, "he's still hanging to Joe's cayuse like a flea, and as far as I can see, whooping it up at the liveliest pace ever. But I'm looking away beyond him to find out if I can see the boys."

"Well, how about it?" asked the other.

"Wait till we swing around again, and I'll tell you."

They were by now high enough to afford quite an extended view in every direction. Frank's eyes had sought the south whenever he had a chance to take them for a second or two from his work; but Andy was leveling the glasses in almost an opposite quarter.

"There! I've just glimpsed a lot of small objects moving this way and that," he announced suddenly, "which I take it are cattle, with the punchers rushing them wherever they want.

But they're a whole heap of miles away, Frank. Guess they see us by now, and expect we're going to sail up that way. Perhaps they'll wonder to watch us turn right around and go off to the south. Is it really necessary, Frank? Couldn't we run up there and let them know?"

"What would be the use?" returned his cousin. "They could never catch Jose, mounted on their ponies, and him with all that start. Why, I'm only afraid he'll be able to cross over into Mexico before we get up with him, for all our swiftness with our humming motor. And minutes are apt to count big in this game, Andy, so I say we'd better not lose any time running over there, and then going down to let them know what's happened. Charley Woo is on the job, and he'll get there sooner or later with the news."

And so Andy said nothing more along those lines.

CHAPTER XIX

OVER PLAIN AND DESERT

"I think we're high enough up now!" observed Frank, presently.

He no longer sent the biplane in widening circles, boring steadily upwards; but turned toward the south and pushed for speed, as far as was compatible with safety, which was always Frank's way.

And Andy seemed to have now lost all interest in what lay behind, for he was looking ahead through the glasses, as though in the hope of discovering the kidnapper of little Becky somewhere in the hazy distance.

It was still comparatively early in the morning, and in places there lay an odd sort of mist that may have been a mirage, obscuring the view, since the earth was hidden in its whitish folds.

Away beyond these spots did Andy turn his marine glasses. Now he saw something moving that at first gave him a little shock; but on second inspection it turned out to be a sailing buzzard, evidently scenting some carrion in a bunch of sage brush, that gave promise of

dinner, since it was close to the earth at the time.

A minute later and Andy had another start, as once more he believed he had discovered an object that certainly crawled over the ground. Could it be some wounded man, or one who was perishing for a drink of water, in that arid land bordering the desert?

But hardly had this thought occurred to Andy than he realized his mistake; for he now saw that it was only a cowardly coyote, shuffling along as though ashamed to be caught returning to his den at such an hour of the morning, after an all night feast, perhaps.

Down below them they could see the plain which formed a part of Double X Ranch. It looked like a great checkerboard, on account of the different colors of the soil, which stood out in relief when one was directly above. Had there been any water there they could have seen to the very bottom, even though it were twenty feet deep, such is the advantage which this lofty position gives. No wonder, thought Andy, that the hawk is able to pick out just the fish he wants for his dinner, and then finds it so easy to pounce down upon the unfortunate thus selected.

Frank was listening to the buzz of the motor.

Whenever they were thus humming along through space this was his favorite occupation. And indeed, when one stops to consider how much depended on the successful operation of that same industrious engine, he could be easily excused for taking such intense interest in its labors. Let it suddenly get out of condition and it would bring the daring young aviators face to face with a crisis that might threaten even their lives. Deprived of the means of making progress would necessitate a volplane toward the ground, always a dangerous performance and one that should only be attempted when the conditions are all favorable, or some desperate need arises.

Turn whichever way Andy would nothing but disappointment seemed to meet him; and being pretty much an impulsive boy, perhaps it was only natural that he should voice his disgust.

"Oh! I wouldn't give that any worry," Frank told him. "If Jose has had as much time as we think, he must be away ahead of the line of your observation just now, especially on account of all that haze along the horizon."

"But if we can't see him, how are we to know that we're keeping in a direct line after him?" demanded the one who wielded the glasses.

"We can only take our chances," Frank answered, steadily, as though he did not mean to be ruffled so early in the game, when so many things remained untried, any one of which might sooner or later prove to be the magic key, fated to unlock the treasure chest.

"And just keep on heading south, is that it, Frank?"

"Exactly so, Andy. We're about dead sure that it's Jose who carried away Little Sunbeam; and knowing that, we can figure he's sure to make a bee line for the nearest place where the border comes. So I'm shaping our course for that same region myself. And when we get there, perhaps we'll find we've been left in the lurch and that his fast ponies have won the day."

"And what then, Frank; would we have to turn around and come back like a dog with his tail between his legs, just because the kidnapper managed to quit American soil, and get on that belonging to Mexico? As for me, I'd be willing to give him the merry chase right down along the line till we landed in Mexico City, or else in a Black Hole in some town on the way."

"I feel pretty much the same way, Andy; but first of all, you see, we've just got to find

out where the man and child are. So keep on looking while I drive her along a little faster. I think we can stand another turn, with this light and favorable breeze carrying us with it."

For several minutes no one said a single word. Frank was busy with his motor, while Andy had his eyes fairly glued to the small end of the glasses, as though he kept hoping that he would make a pleasing discovery the very next minute.

Now even the ranch building would be found to look very small and far to their rear, did they bother glancing back that way, which, to tell the truth, neither of them did.

And at the same time the rough country came closer, until one could see where the fertile plain really ended, and the sandy desert began.

Unless one made a very wide detour it was absolutely necessary to cross over this arid waste in order to reach the Mexican border. Frank had been figuring it all out. He believed that Jose, being a bold and audacious man, would not think of taking the longer route. In the first place that course was apt to keep him exposed to the hot pursuit which he knew he could count on as the result of his audacious exploit. And doubtless Jose was fully aware of the reputation those hard riding cow punchers connected with the Double X Ranch had as

trackers and fighters too, on occasion. What they had done to the Mexican cattle rustlers must have made a reputation for them across the border; so that Jose knew what chances he was taking when he started in to steal his daughter, which the court had given over into the keeping of her relative, Mr. Witherspoon.

And Andy was not a great while in making the discovery that they were now approaching the confines of that sandy region where the sun beat pitilessly down all through the livelong hours of the day, and the heat must be terrific.

Up where they were they could feel nothing of the earth's radiation, and doubtless it would be delightfully cool.

Beyond as far as the eye could reach, it held, that same glaring stretch of glistening sand, on the surface of which toward noon it would be easily possible to fry an egg; indeed Andy had actually done the same on a previous visit, when they dropped down to discover how it felt to be adrift in the midst of a desert, he having been put up to the game through words spoken by Buckskin.

Far away to the west he saw the tops of high mountains, but they must have been scores of miles off. Between doubtless lay the desert, with perhaps a stretch of the plain where the

grass grew, and even flowers could be found in their season, all the difference being brought about by the presence of earth in the one case and nothing but sand in the other.

On this waste nothing seemed to grow save the cactus that stood up like giant sentinels guarding the cemetery of centuries. Here and there one could find the skulls and bones of unfortunate animals that had become lost in the sand storms occasionally blowing over this heated stretch, to perish miserably from suffocation or else subsequent thirst.

Straining his eyes Andy kept on looking, always hoping that the very next minute might result in a pleasing discovery. If the glare caused his eyes to burn he paid little attention to that discomfort. All the while he was thinking how terrible it would be if they had, after all, made a mistake in figuring out the probable way Jose would take in trying to escape the penalty of his cruel deed. Should he have turned aside, and continued to avoid the desert, all their work would go for nothing.

Still, Andy had the utmost confidence in his chum's ability to grapple with a question like this. He felt that Frank must know just about what would be passing in the mind of the man they were hunting. Frank had a faculty for

putting himself in another's place, and figuring things out from that standpoint.

And then there was another comforting thought that came to Andy. Supposing the fugitive had done this same thing, he could not reach the border under several days, since the desert was extensive; and surely there would be a good chance of the hard-riding cowboys coming up on him meanwhile.

They would of course follow directly on his trail, their practiced eyes picking it out of the many that crossed the level stretch to the south of the ranch buildings. And like blood-hounds on the scent, once they had started, they would keep it up to the end.

As the aeroplane pushed on, and neared the border of the desert, so plainly marked below, Andy gave an ejaculation that caused Frank to look expectant.

"A pony, Frank, yes, two of them feeding there, and without saddle or bridle to show that they have been ridden. Whatever can that mean?" he called out, so as to be heard above the humming of the motor.

"I think I can guess," replied the other, quickly. "This has been a deep-laid scheme, and no sudden fancy. Jose has made all sorts of preparations for carrying it out with success.

He knows that perhaps his life would pay the penalty for any failure. So, you see, Andy, chances are, he left two fresh ponies staked out here and ready for use when he came along after riding the others for these twenty or more miles. A quick change of saddles and bridles, and then he and the little girl were away again, this time striking out straight across the sand, and headed for the nearest point of the Mexican border."

"That sounds like you had guessed it first pop out of the bottle, Frank," the other went on to say, "and if it's so, then we're bound to come up on him before long."

Andy once more started to glue his eyes to the end of the field glasses. Carefully did he scrutinize every object he could pick out along the horizon ahead. If he had any idea that it moved, he would stop in his shifting movement to concentrate his gaze long and earnestly upon that one spot; but only to give a grunt of bitter disappointment, and once more continue to scan the waste of sand beyond.

So it went on for some time. The minutes must have seemed unduly long to the ever anxious lad. Frank, more inclined to take things as they came, always hoping for the best, was better able to control his emotions.

It had perhaps been twenty minutes since they reached the border of the desert, and now on all sides they could see actually nothing but that same dead glare of the burning sun beating on the absorbing sand.

Frank was himself thinking that they must have reached the limit of distance which the fugitive could have covered, even though he had a fresh relay of ponies to help him along; when once again he heard his cousin give utterance to that bubbling little cry that seemed to announce a fresh discovery.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT ANDY SAW FROM ALOFT

"No false alarm this time, eh, Andy?" asked Frank, quickly

"I think not," came the ready response.

"Ponies again?" queried the pilot, as he steadied the quivering biplane by a little movement that had become second nature with both young aviators; just as a boy rider on a bicycle unconsciously bends his body at just the proper angle when about to whirl around a curve in the road.

"Yes," the other replied.

"And riders too, this time, I hope?" Frank went on.

"I'm dead sure of it, because there are two horses, and they're running along side by side, Frank."

"That looks more like it; and I want to say it's about time we struck some good warm scent about now. That Jose had been going at a mad pace ever since the start, and the poor little girl, how I pity her, Andy."

"But however in the wide world d'ye suppose she could stick on a pony through it all?" the boy with the glasses asked, wonder in his

voice, as he continued to keep watch upon the far distant moving objects which he had discovered, thanks to the magnifying qualities of the powerful lens.

"Oh! there's only one answer to that, my boy," answered Frank. "Jose must have tied her to the pony. And even at that I feel mighty sorry for the little thing, for it must have been a terrible run, all these hours."

"The inhuman scoundrel!" growled Andy, almost savagely. "I'd just like to see him get what's coming to him, if the boys ever lay hands on him."

"Well," observed Frank, "I wouldn't say that, until we find out how Becky's stood the long ride. If he's been cruel to her besides, then I'd be inclined to say what you did; but there's always the chance that the man really wants to have possession of his own child; for he's her father, we've got to remember."

"Yes, but think of all we've heard from the boys at the ranch about how badly he treated Mr. Witherspoon's niece, after running away with her, and marrying her. You needn't tell me, Frank, that such a man is going to care anything for his own child. Like enough he hates Becky, just because she looks like the wife he treated so bad. And I'm ready to

believe he's doing this right now, not to get possession of his own, but to strike a blow at Uncle Jethro, because he hates him so."

"I'm not saying that it isn't so, because all things point that way," Frank continued. "But how are we coming on now, Andy?"

"Drawing up on them by degrees; but I notice that you've cut off more'n a little power, Frank, and that we're not rushing along as fast as we were. Tell me, what have you done that for?"

"Well, you see, now that we've sighted our game there's no need of rushing things at racehorse speed. We'd better go along a little slower, and try to get the lay of things in our minds before we drop down, and surprise Mr. Jose Sandero," was the way the aeroplane pilot made reply.

There was little of the haphazard about Frank. As a general rule he had a reason for everything he did; and each move was carefully considered beforehand.

Not that he could not do things with lightning-like rapidity when there was actual need for haste, because he had frequently surprised even quick moving Andy on occasions; but the chances were he had thought out all the

results of the action before the occasion for it came about.

And the beauty of the relationship between the two Bird boys lay in this fact, that Andy recognized his cousin's superiority of judgment, and rarely, if ever, questioned his decision.

This did not mean that Andy was merely an "echo," for that would be a wrong view to take of the case; he had a mind of his own, and often Frank was only too glad to ask his advice when a little in doubt himself. But when two fellows keep company a long time as chums, they gradually come to know each other "from the ground up," as Andy would express it; and one of them just naturally forges a little to the front as the leader.

In the case of the Bird boys it happened to be Frank, that was all.

As they kept on advancing after the moving figures, Andy would from time to time continue to make some remark, as he looked through the glasses; so that in this way Frank was posted on how things were going.

Even though he cast an occasional glance ahead on his own account, as yet he had not been able to exactly locate the fugitives. This might partly be on account of the smallness of two ponies at such a distance; and then

again the glare of the sun, far up in the heavens, in spite of the early hour, was very strong on the desert sand.

There was one thing that Frank was pretty positive about; he believed that the fugitive Mexican could hardly as yet have discovered what was coming after him. To his naked eye the aeroplane would hardly be noticed at all; or if it did accidentally catch his attention, he would believe that it was merely some buzzard, or perhaps a great bald eagle floating in space far up in the blue expanse of sky.

If he looked back at all he would be more apt to confine his anxious gaze to the level horizon, for it would be there an enemy was apt to appear; no sane man could dream of an attack from above, since aeroplanes have not yet become so common as to be recognized by everyone.

And so the pursuit went on.

Andy seemed deeply engrossed in his business of "keeping tab" on the movements of those so far in front.

Presently he began to notice that Frank was doing something to effect a change in their relative positions.

"Are you going down now?" Andy demanded a little fearfully, as though he could not understand why such a move should be in order.

"Better now, than later on," returned the pilot. "We're too high up to be able to make any sort of landing when we want to. Besides now that you've got track of Jose, there's really no need of keeping to this high elevation."

"Then after you bring the biplane down to a lower level, we can just rush things, if we think it best, is that it, Frank?"

"My notion to a dot, Andy."

They were already circling around, so as to descend in the safer "spirals." Frank would not take the great risk of volplaning when the other way answered just as well, and at one-tenth the chance of accident.

Andy managed to keep his eyes on the distant ponies pretty much all the time the aeroplane was dropping in those immense circles, each one lower in the grand spiral than the preceding one.

"They're gaining some on us, Frank!" he finally announced, regretfully, as if he just could not bear the thought.

"Oh! that's a mere nothing," declared his cousin, cheerfully; "and I wouldn't bother my head over it, if I were you, Andy. Why, when we get to where I want to go, all I've got to do is to put on speed, and we'll make that up in three shakes of a lamb's tail. What

are two or three miles to a wonder of the air that can, if hard pushed, clip along at the rate of a hundred an hour, and perhaps that is far from the capacity of a reliable biplane with a favorable wind."

As usual Frank managed to cheer his chum up immediately.

"Sure, you're about right, Frank, and I was silly to let it bother me. But seems as if we ought to be down nearly far enough. If there were any trees here we'd be only a couple of hundred feet or so above their tops. And whew! Frank, I can feel the heat of that desert easy enough now, even while we're moving along like we are."

"It's all over now, and I don't mean to go down any further. Tell me if you can still see Jose and the little girl, Andy?"

"Yes, I can see the ponies moving like crabs away off there; and I'm taking it for granted that the ones we're chasing after are mounted on the same, Frank. Oh! wouldn't it be a terrible disappointment now, if after we got up close we found we'd been bamboozled, and that these were only a couple of Indians, or Mexicans going back home after trading in some American town?"

"There's always a little chance that way,"

Frank admitted, "but all the same I don't believe we're going to be disappointed. Traders would hardly strike across this desert, you understand. It's a bad place to get lost in, and mighty unpleasant traveling at the best. Few people cross it, they said at the ranch. Once in a while some Indians wander down here from their reservation in the northern end of the State. You know the Navajos used to be in this region, and the Comanches too, I was told, before the Government rounded them up, and gave them lands up there, besides paying them a big sum every year in money and supplies."

"I wonder——" began Andy, and then stopped, while he screwed his eyes still closer to the ends of the twin tubes of the marine glasses.

"What's the matter now?" asked Frank, realizing that in all probability Andy had made some fresh discovery.

"Frank, there's sure something moving over beyond where Jose and Becky are plodding along. I can see several dots, and they have life to them, too! It looks for all the world to me as if a pack of wolves might be lying in wait for the ponies—half starved wolves maybe, crazy for a chance to pull them down, and make a meal."

"Wolves," repeated the other, thoughtfully; "it would be hard for me to believe such animals would ever be found in the middle of this sandy desert, where they'd never find a bite of food in a year, and not a drop of water. You must be mistaken, Andy; look again, won't you, please?"

Nevertheless the suggestion appeared to influence Frank so that he again sent the aeroplane ahead at full speed; and Andy had a little difficulty in keeping his glasses steady when leveling them, such was the constant vibration of the uprights, under the full force of the powerful little Kinkaid engine.

But it was so much in sympathy with his own desire to get ahead that Andy was willing to put up with almost any trouble. He knew instinctively from the feel of the biplane that they were now speeding.

A minute later, and he gave another exclamation.

"Frank, I saw something flash just then; and as sure as you live I believe it must have been the sunlight glistening on steel, just like it might be a gun barrel or a knife!"

"Do you mean that you saw it ahead of Jose, and among the crawling objects you thought were wolves?" demanded the other.

"Yes, yes, there it is again, Frank!"

"Well, that settles one thing then—they're hardly wolves, Andy; for I never yet heard of such animals carrying either guns or knives did you?"

"They're spreading out, Frank, just like they were lying in wait for Jose. And while it looks queer from up here why doesn't he discover them, I suppose that's because they're hiding behind some sand hills," Andy went on to say.

"But you don't think any longer that they can be be wolves, do you, Andy?"

"Not much," the other replied. "We're getting closer all the time, and now I can see that they must be walking on two legs; though for that matter they seem to be sprawled out pretty much all of the time, like great toads, hopping this way and that. And Jose, he don't know what's waiting for him, not one little bit."

"Then he's still going on, is he?" asked Frank.

"Yes, and now I can see that each pony has a rider; why, Frank, we're bearing down on them so fast that I can tell Jose from little Becky. It's her, all right, Frank. Don't I see her hair flying out behind as she rides. Oh! the meaness of that skunk making that little

child gallop across this red-hot desert, just to save himself from being caught by our boys."

"Well, you could hardly blame him for that," Frank went on to say, with a touch of humor in his voice, "because what a bunch of furious cow punchers wouldn't do to him you could say in one breath. But tell me, how does it look now?"

"They're getting mighty close to where the men are waiting, Frank. Whoever do you suppose they can be?"

"We've heard a lot about that Mexican cattle rustler, Carlos, since we've come to the ranch; perhaps, now, these may be some of his crowd. They've got no love for the Double X Ranch boys, you remember; and if they think Jose and the child belong there, it's going to go hard with them. But you see we don't know all about it yet. Take a closer look, Andy."

"Yes, I've got the lot in focus," muttered the other.

"Do you see any feathers about them—examine their heads, and tell me," Frank went on to say.

"Feathers!" ejaculated Andy, in astonishment, "why what in the wide world would—say, Frank, do you have an idea that they may be Indians?"

"Well, I heard your uncle say that once in a while they've seen a squad of the reds down this way, sort of escaped from their reservation, and trying to see how it feels to be wild again. How about those feathers, Andy?"

"Why, there does seem to be something queer about the heads of those chaps, I give you my word there is, Frank. Honest now, I believe you've struck it right, and that they are Indians, but Frank, would they hold Jose up, and perhaps take his scalp, just like in the old days?"

"If so be they've been indulging in too much firewater. I wouldn't put even that past them," the other boy answered, soberly.

"Well," added Andy, with a shutting of his teeth; "I'm glad of one thing, then."

"What's that?" questioned the other.

"That we brought our bully old Marlins along, Frank!" was the quick response Andy made.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TERROR OF THE AIR

'Perhaps you'd better be getting the guns loose, Andy," suggested Frank, in his quiet way.

"You bet I will, and only too glad of the chance; but can you hold yours while you steer; or shall I fix it, so you can grab it up the very second you land the biplane on the sand?" Andy asked, as he let the glasses hang by their strap, and with hands that doubtless trembled more than a little, he proceeded to unfasten the two repeating Marlins with which so much execution had been done on the occasion of the grizzly bear hunt.

"Better lay it in the crotch you made for me, where I can get it in a hurry when my hands are free," the pilot explained.

By the time all this had been done they were of course much closer to the scene of the expected trouble. And when Andy again picked up the glasses, and clapped them to his eyes, he uttered new exclamations that indicated excitement.

"It's coming, Frank!" he exclaimed.

"You mean the attack, Andy?"

"Yes, because now Jose seems to have be-

come suddenly suspicious. There, I can see him jump off his pony, and he's doing something with Becky. As sure as anything, Frank, I do believe he's cutting the strap that's held the child to the saddle. That looks like he expects trouble, don't it?"

"I should say yes," replied Frank, shortly.

"Hark! did you hear that?" suddenly demanded Andy.

"I thought I caught a faint sound like a shot," replied the other.

"That was just what it was, Frank. I saw the smoke long before we got the crack of the gun."

"Who fired?" demanded Frank.

"One of those concealed Indians; and there goes another, and yet a third shot! Oh! Frank what if they should hit poor little Becky, the half-drunken scamps, trying to believe these are the good old days when they chased white men across the plains. Just listen to the shots would you, Frank?"

Andy was fairly quivering with the nervous tension. What made it doubly hard was the fact that while he could see these exciting things so easily through the powerful lens of the glasses, yet they were still far away from the scene of action and unable to raise a hand as

yet to render any assistance, should such be needed.

"What is Jose doing now?" asked Frank.

"Oh! one of the ponies seems to be down, and for the life of me I can't tell you whether it was shot, or has laid down like some of those cow ponies are taught to do, Frank. There goes the other one the same way. And now Jose has pulled the little girl down with him. They're out of sight behind the bodies of the ponies, I do believe, Frank!"

"Bully for Jose, then; he sure knows how to stand the Indians off!" exclaimed Frank; and for the time being Andy seemed to forget that just a minute or two back he had been declaring that the same Jose deserved the worst punishment the cow-punchers from the Double X Ranch could deal out to him, for he almost echoed the words of his chum.

"Good! good! he's opened fire, too, for I can see the puff of smoke each time he pulls trigger. Oh! Frank!"

"Well, what now?" demanded the other, a little impatiently, as Andy paused after giving that last exclamation that might stand for almost anything.

"He hit one of the Indians that time, as

sure as anything!" Andy declared, with a ring of delight in his voice.

"What makes you think so?" demanded Frank.

"Didn't I see him turn a flop, though; and right now he's holding his leg like fun! Guess he got a puncture in his tire, all right, Frank. After all, that Jose can shoot some, let me tell you. There, I do believe he's gone and done it again!"

"What! hit another Indian, Andy?"

"Well, I c'n see a second fellow rolling over and over; and now he sits up and it looks like he's examining his arm. Perhaps they're beginning to learn that it ain't all one sided after all, this stopping a mounted man, and trying some of the old tricks. Mebbe they'll want to clear out now, Frank?"

"That wouldn't be like Indian nature, from what they've been telling me since we came here," Frank went on to say. "They're all as obstinate as they make them; and the chances are, these fellows will just be more bent on shooting Jose up than ever, if, as you say, he's already pinked a couple of their men."

"Well, they don't seem to be clearing out that I can notice, and that's a fact," Andy admitted immediately afterward.

Frank could himself hear the reports of guns being discharged, and they came so thick and fast that he could almost imagine a battle was being fought between large numbers of enemies on either side. Evidently the Indians were flush with ammunition, and did not hesitate to use it plentifully. The White Father in Washington would supply them with plenty more when this was gone; or at any rate the hard cash with which to purchase the same. And they were just as prodigal in wasting cartridges as so many half-grown and irresponsible boys might have been.

For the number of shots that kept ringing out, the amount of damage done must have been remarkably small, from the accounts Andy kept giving him.

The Indians were creeping along wherever they could find protection by way of the sand dunes; and the watcher in the air declared that he believed they meant to completely surround the man at bay, when doubtless they could pour in such a hot fire that he would either have to surrender, or else be wiped out.

It was a pretty exciting time for the two young aviators while they were thus speeding toward the scene of the desert warfare. The biplane was doing its level best, and yet so im-

patient was Andy to arrive before the Indians had succeeded in accomplishing their terrible work that it seemed to him they were fairly crawling along.

"Oh! can't we go faster, Frank?" he begged more than once.

"We're doing the limit right now," Frank would answer.

"I suppose so, Frank, but don't you know it seems like we'd never get there at this pace," Andy would go on to say.

"Keep cool," was the advice of the other.

"I'm trying as hard as I can to do that, but it makes me shiver all over when I think of poor little Becky being exposed to that shooting," said Andy, between his clinched teeth.

"Well, let's hope Jose has been merciful enough to keep her lying flat on the ground behind the ponies. They must be dead, Andy, because with all that lead flying around no cayuse would ever consent to lie still, wounded perhaps at that. And their bodies would protect the child, even if they didn't do the same altogether for the man. Is he still shooting?"

"I haven't noticed a puff of smoke over the spot for some time—but there, I did get a glimpse of one just then; and Frank, believe me, he must have done it again, because I can

see several of the others crawling toward one that seems to be kicking on the ground. There, they're helping him away. Let me tell you that same Jose is no slouch when it comes to using a gun. He must have had a lot of practice in the revolutions they have every little while down in Mexico since Diaz was kicked out. I take off my hat to Jose when it comes to knocking chips off the shoulders of half-drunken reds."

And this was the same Jose whom Andy had been saying such hard things against only a short time before; but then circumstances alter cases; and right now Jose was risking his life in defense of the little girl whom he had for some reason kidnapped from her home.

When they had been observing these things some time back they may have been as much as ten miles away from the scene of spirited action; but as the biplane was spinning along at a tremendous pace, in spite of the belief of Andy that it did not seem to be doing its best, this distance was being rapidly diminished.

Whenever the shots came now they were plainly heard, as the air seemed to be directly in the faces of the aeroplane boys while thus heading into the south.

And Andy also noticed that they kept grad-

ually sinking just a little lower as they proceeded. Had he been able to allow himself time to think this over, he must have guessed why Frank was doing this; and that he wanted to avoid being discovered by the Indians until he could suddenly burst upon their vision in a terrifying apparition, frightening them so badly that they would only think of making a hasty flight.

Well, things were going on at such a pace now that whatever the outcome might prove to be, it would soon be over. In a couple of minutes at most the oncoming air wonder must have arrived so close to the scene of the disturbance that its presence could no longer be concealed from the sharp eyes of the Indians. Some warrior whose eyesight had not been so seriously impaired by the strong drink he had purchased from some bootlegger or trader, would while peeping around a sand dune, suddenly discover that dreadful apparition coming straight through the air, with an angry mutter that could only mean the sore displeasure of the Great Spirit, whose messenger this frightful object must be.

And when this occurred, Frank was rather inclined to believe there would be a scamper on the part of the frolicking Indians such as

had not been seen on this same desert for many a day.

Luckily they could depend on the stability of their machine; and every particular part of the framework had been carefully gone over just the preceding day by the one whose hand now controlled the levers by means of which the aeroplane was guided on its way through space.

Hence, there was little likelihood of any accident happening. Frank did not allow the thought of such a thing to enter into his calculations. He placed the fullest dependence upon those staunch steel guys and the faithful little motor that never yet had failed him in time of need.

"Oh! will we ever get there?" groaned Andy.

"Keep cool, and hold on; we're doing fine!" was Frank's advice.

"But I think they're getting ready to rush Jose now!" the other went on to declare, with renewed excitement.

"What makes you think that, Andy?"

"They seem to have gathered in knots in three places, and act like they meant to make a swoop down on him from all sides at once," came the answer.

"Well, if they'll only hold off another min-

ute or two we'll fix things so that their swoop'll turn out a fizzle. Tell me when they start out on the run, Andy, because I want to turn on our siren, you know."

"Oh! I clean forgot all about that little trick Frank!"

Frank some time before had arranged a contrivance by means of which he could make the engine sound a loud-voiced whistle that he always called a siren, because it had all the harsh, discordant notes of the big steam fog-horns to be heard in some places along the stormy coasts of our country, where the dangerous shoals or reefs make it important that vessels should be warned while still far out at sea.

This could be made to do duty at a second's notice. Of course the boys did not often sound the deep-throated whistle or horn, because it was apt to create too much alarm in every living thing that heard it for the first time, animals as well as human beings.

But in a desperate case such as the one by which they were now confronted this hoarse-tongued signal might prove the very finest auxiliary they could hope to have in alarming the attacking Indians.

And here Andy, with his usual thoughtlessness had entirely forgotten about such a means of

sending out a warning; while Frank had it in his mind all along. That little incident showed the difference between the two cousins; for with all his good qualities Andy often forgot things that it would have paid him well to remember.

Both of them were intensely intersted by now, and a study of their set faces would have been worth while. Andy did not depend on the glasses any longer to tell how things were progressing, since they had come close enough for him to see with the naked eye. Of course, the fact that they were several hundred feet above the level of the sand gave considerable assistance, for they were entirely free from the little dazzling heat waves that must hug the face of the desert more and more as the day advanced, making seeing perfectly a difficult job.

The seconds clicked along, each one in the mind of the impatient Andy being registered by so many loud "pops" of the exhaust, for it was not muffled now.

"There, what did I tell you, Frank; listen to those awful yells, would you? Oh! he knocked one over then, I say! But the whole lot have started up, and bending low down are sprinting in the direction of Jose as fast as they can go. Frank, why don't you do something

before they get to him? It's now or never, I tell you; just hear the guns going off with a rattle and a bang! Frank——"

But Andy's words were suddenly lost in a most terrific roaring sound that broke forth, as Frank turned on the big siren whistle or horn. Across the face of the desert went the strange sound, in a wave that would annihilate space. And coming to the startled ears of the on-rushing Indians, it must have instantly riveted their attention.

Imagine their astonishment when upon raising their eyes for the first time they discovered what seemed to be a tremendous bird rushing through the air toward them and uttering that thrilling whoop, the like of which none of them had ever heard before.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BIRD BOYS' TRIUMPH

The aeroplane was speeding down upon the spot, with that loud-throated siren going at full blast. Andy had been holding himself in so long now, that it was utterly impossible for him to stand it any longer; so he too let out a series of ear-piercing shrieks that at least added to the din.

Not content with that the boy commenced firing his repeating Marlin. He did not bother trying to take any particular aim, which would of course have been next to impossible in the swaying aeroplane, any way; but only meant to add all he could to the tremendous din accompanying their swoop.

Frank could see all that happened, because they were no longer far away. No need of glasses either at this stage of the game. He could note the movements of every one of those who had been in the act of rushing the Mexican at bay when the appearance of the biplane in the near heavens came to put a damper on their enthusiasm.

Although at first stunned by the sight that met their startled eyes, and the ear-splitting

sounds accompanying the same, the runaway Indians from the reservation had quickly remembered that they still had legs. If any of them had been a bit wobbly before, on account of the potions they had been imbibing, it seemed to be driven from their systems by this scare, for they ran like prize sprinters. Even the several wounded warriors endeavoring to flatten themselves down behind the sand dunes, as though in hopes of being able to hide from the argus eyes of this wonder of the skies.

Andy no longer had any fears concerning the attack, for he saw that it had been effectually broken up by their coming. He started to shout again, but found it beyond his ability, for the situation had resolved itself into a comical farce by this time in the boy's mind, and offered all the humorous aspects of a great joke.

But none of those Indians thought so, if one could judge from the way they were running. Andy had seen rabbits speeding away after the crack of a gun; but that was hardly in the same class with what those braves did that morning.

Some of them jumped this way and that as they sped off; as though under the impression that they might thus escape the swarm of bullets that their imagination filled the air with, on hearing the crackle of Andy's fast-shooting

gun. Others dodged behind each succeeding sand hill, and then appearing beyond, continued their flight in eccentric curves; only glad if by this means they might escape the terrible eye of that mighty bird that came whirring along, letting out such hideous war cries, and assuming all the appearances of a dragon as pictured by the Chinese on their flags and everywhere.

Frank did not attempt to alight just then; he believed that it was good policy to make sure that the hostiles had all been frightened off before exposing the fact that after all it was only two boys in some clever invention of the white man who had come upon the scene.

And so, instead of heading directly for the spot where Jose lay behind the two ponies, which they now realized were surely dead, Frank continued to sweep around in a widening circle.

It was worth while to see the abject terror of such of the Indians as they passed over. They would flatten themselves on the burning sand, as though hoping in this way to escape the attention of the terror that was seeking its prey; nor did any one of them dare to turn his head to look upward at the monstrous bird with that loud shriek.

From a distance one or two discharged guns at the speeding aeroplane, but of course there

was not one chance in ten thousand of the bullets doing any execution while the Bird boys were rushing along at such a pace; indeed, they did not even hear the whine of the passing lead.

Frank had his hands full taking care of the biplane, so that even had he desired to do so he could not have added anything to the racket. One hand controlled the lever which brought about the circling movement of the aeroplane, while with the other he kept that siren busy.

But by now Andy had bethought him of another means for adding to the panic of the fleeing Indians. In the box just back of him he happened to have a number of large cannon firecrackers. Under ordinary conditions these would appear to be rather queer things to carry on an aeroplane; but it seemed that Andy was particularly interested in experimenting with dropping stones which he called "bombs," from a great height, in order to see how aeroplanes might be made useful in war times. And thinking some time to rather astonish Frank by sending down some of those big explosives, he had smuggled them aboard.

The idea had about passed from his mind at this time, but suddenly remembering the big red crackers, he was now pulling them out, and feeling for some of those wind matches they al-

ways carried when on a trip, because they could be used no matter what current of air they happened to be passing through.

Frank did not see what his cousin was doing. In the first place he had enough to look after as it was; and then again, when he could spare a second, he wanted to ascertain what the Indians were up to.

The first thing he knew about it was when a terrific report came from directly under the aeroplane, and close to the face of the sandy stretch. Immediately on top of it came a shriek from Andy.

"Oh! it nearly fell on top of that Indian before it exploded, Frank! If only you could have seen him go head over heels; and now he's running to beat the band! Talk to me about a scared rabbit, these noble red men are sure the limit. I really believe they think the Day of Judgment has come along ahead of time. If you keep it up much longer, Frank, I'm going to fall right out of my seat; I'm laughing so hard I just can't sit still."

"Then perhaps it's about time we called a stop on the excitement, and let the poor fellows get away," said Frank.

"No danger of them coming back again," ventured Andy, as he threw his last big cannon

cracker in the quarter where he had caught sight of another brave trying to dig a hole in the sand, as though wild to cover himself up, and thus avoid attracting the attention of the monster bird.

His aim was pretty fair, since Andy had been practicing this thing for quite some time now. The explosion took place on schedule time, too; and with about as tremendous a result as before; since it sent the terrorized warrior flying off as if he believed the Evil Spirit were in full pursuit.

Frank turned back.

The coast seemed clear of Indians now, even the wounded braves having found some way of hiding from sight. Perhaps they had in despair scooped hollows out of the burning sand, and were even now lying under a scanty covering of the same, trembling in mortal terror of discovery.

Neither of the Bird boys cared whether this were so or not. They had succeeded in accomplishing their main object; which of course had been to give the assailants of Jose a severe scare, so as to scatter them to the four winds. And now the next thing they wanted to do was to drop to the earth, and capture the man himself.

Accordingly Frank guided the biplane to

where he thought best to make his landing. Then he proceeded to accomplish this ordinary feat with his accustomed ability.

As the sand was loose and liable to clog the wheels, he had to be additionally careful about landing. And Frank had already experimented in getting up again after dropping upon such a shifting bed, so that he knew just how it should be done.

Picking out a spot which looked better than anything around it, he brought the aeroplane to the ground so softly that it almost seemed like a thistle-down blown by the wind, and alighting.

The motor had ceased to whirr, and the propellers to whizz as Andy, clutching his Marlin in his grasp, sprang from his seat to the sand.

Frank was hardly three seconds behind him, and it might be noticed that he too held one of the useful guns.

Who could tell what need they might have for these life preservers, when adrift in such a desert land, and with reckless Indians all around them; not to speak of the man who lay behind the two dead ponies, with his gun covering them even now.

Frank was not taking any chances with Jose. He knew that the Mexican must be in a desperate frame of mind, and ready to fight to the

last gasp before he would consent to yield. And Frank believed it strategy when it could be made to answer the purpose.

What they wanted above all else just now was the return of little Becky to the care of her legal guardian. They were not appointed to wreak vengeance on the head of the father who had seen fit to steal his own child away. Besides, somehow, after seeing how valiantly Jose had held the whole band of reservation Indians at bay, both boys felt considerable more respect for the Mexican. At least he was no coward, even if his actions in the past had been along that line, Jose, like so many of his class was a bravo; he could display mean traits toward women and children, but face half a dozen men in a brawl, or a fight like this, without showing the white feather.

So Frank immediately held up his hand, as he called aloud:

"Halloo! Joss Andero! do not fire upon us! We will not do you harm if you turn over the child to us to take back to her home! Do you understand me?"

They saw the figure of the Mexican now. He had scrambled to his feet to face the boys who had come so happily to his rescue just in time to save his life. Perhaps this fact was duly

impressed upon the mind of the man from across the border. He owed these lads something, and a Mexican always has an exaggerated sense of his own honor; it is a heritage he has received from his Spanish ancestors far back.

"Si, senors," he answered back, in a mellow tone, "I understand. Come closer that we may talk it over. I promise you I will not fire one shot. Carramba! it is only one that I have left me, after all you saw."

Then they advanced until close by where the two dead ponies lay. One thought was in the minds of both Frank and his cousin—the little girl, how had she fared while all the bullets were flying through the air, sent by half drunken Indians who cared little where they landed.

Jose had suffered. His left arm hung almost helplessly at his side, and they could see that the blood was dripping from his fingers; but he clutched his repeating gun in the right hand and seemed still full of the lust of battle.

"How about the child; is she safe?" called Frank almost afraid to ask the question, for his heart seemed in his throat with the dreadful suspense.

"Surely, senors," came the immediate reassuring reply. "I saw to it that she lay flat on the ground where nothing could injure her.

Look and see for yourselves," and with that he spoke something to little Becky, so that she immediately sprang to her feet and stretched her tiny hands longingly toward the boys.

At that both of them experienced a deep sense of relief. It began to look, if only Jose proved reasonable, that the end of their long and arduous air chase was now in sight, and that presently they could proceed back to the ranch, bearing with them the little sprite whose abduction had created all this excitement.

"We would make terms with you, Jose," said Frank in a business like way.

"I am ready to hear what you have to say, young senor," came the reply.

"You admit that our coming has probably saved your life?" Frank went on, thinking it the part of wisdom to have that point well under stood in the beginning.

"Si, senor, it is true, and for that Jose is grateful; if it had not been so he would not consent to give up the child, even if you tried to recover her by force. But you have done me a good turn, and perhaps we can make terms. If, then, I hand her over, will you agree that I go my way unmolested?"

"We willingly agree to that, Jose. You may be a bad man, but we saw you stand off those

Indians like a brave one, and for that we respect you. Yes, we will promise not to raise a hand to molest you. Listen Jose, if you place the little girl in our hands we will promise to do even more than that, if so be you are courageous enough to trust yourself with us in our aeroplane. We could rise with you, and fly far away across the desert to where you will be near the border. There we can land, and give you a chance to save yourself from these Indians, who may hang around here, seeking revenge for the wounds you have given them."

That was a square offer on the part of Frank. Andy held his breath, wondering if the other would dare accept it. The same courage that had led Jose to face the guns of the Indians might not be sufficient to allow of his getting aboard that wonderful air bird, and let himself be carried up among the clouds.

Jose was hesitating between opinions. He hardly knew which seemed the worse of the two. But one danger he could understand, while the other was along the line of the mysterious and unfathomable.

They saw him pondering for a full minute. Then, as if he had made up his mind, he threw up his hand.

"I will accept your offer, senor," he said.

"A man can die but once, and what matter if he fall from the clouds, he may never know what hurts him. And if I am left here without without a mount, the Indians are sure to get me. Advance, then, senors, and fix it as you please. I am ready to take the word of such honorable young men."

But all the same Andy could see that he shuddered when he cast a glance over toward the quarter where the stranded biplane lay, as though the mere thought of allowing himself to be carried up in the regions of the upper currents aboard that frail combination of engine, planes, and rigid uprights and stays, struck Jose as with a cold breath from the Arctic regions.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOME AGAIN—CONCLUSION

Frank knew that they had better not loiter there. Still, he could not see Jose losing blood like that, when it was so easy to stop the flow.

So, while Andy watched to see that none of the frightened Indians got over their scare, and came sneaking back, bent on potting some of the palefaces, Frank made a quick job of looking after the wounded arm of the Mexican.

The man seemed to hardly know what to make of it all. He watched every move of the amateur doctor as though he could not understand how any one would be so generous toward an enemy. But Frank knew what he was doing, and he meant to extract a promise from Jose, before they left him, that never again would he dream of trying to do any injury toward either little Becky or Mr. Witherspoon, her relative, and legally appointed guardian. And he believed the man would keep such a promise faithfully too; for Frank was a pretty good reader of human nature.

Then they all walked toward the aeroplane that lay there on the hot sand as a camel of the

desert might for its Arab owner, prostrate for his mounting.

It was easy enough to fasten little Becky in; but with the man there had to be some maneuvering, because a sudden movement on his part would endanger them all. Jose drew a long breath as he took his seat, and held grimly onto an upright with his one well hand, his rifle strapped to his back meanwhile. It was as though he hardly expected to ever come safely down again; but then he had carefully counted the cost, and having decided his pride would not allow him to back out.

Frank knew that it would be a very difficult task to get the biplane to travel over the sand at a rate of speed sufficient to allow of their mounting when the proper moment came; but he had experimented so many times, looking to some such contingency, that he believed he could surmount every trouble.

He therefore moved the aeroplane with the help of the others, so that he would have the assistance of the slight wind that was blowing.

Finally all was ready.

The motor began to hum, gradually increasing its note as Frank turned on more power, on finding that his hopes were about to be fulfilled. Yes, they were actually passing along over the

sand now; for just there it was packed more than in most places. Andy had held his breath with the suspense, figuring on how he could climb back if he had to go overboard to help push. But it was all right now, and such a move would not be necessary.

When the final moment arrived, they started gradually upward. Frank heard Jose gasp for breath, and he knew the Mexican must be saying his prayers from the low mumble that drifted in at his ear; doubtless the man was almost stiff with fright when he dared look down, and saw that he was apparently as far above the surface of the desert as many mountain peaks would be.

Frank knew what he was doing, and that if the man was left on the desert in his present wounded and weakened condition, it was just the same as giving him over to death, which might come in any one of several ways. If the Indians did not get him he might starve or die from lack of water; and then again, should the infuriated cow puncher band from the Double X Ranch come upon Jose he might count on a short shrift and a rope.

After all was said and done, fortune had been so kind that no irreparable damage had followed the bold raid of Jose, unless indeed poor

old Tige had received a dose of poison as the boys had feared. Little Becky seemed to have come through it all in very good shape, and for these mercies Frank felt that they had great reason to be thankful.

And that was mainly why he was now carrying Jose across the balance of the desert to place him on the road to the near-by border, beyond which he undoubtedly had friends who would take care of him.

Andy had not forgotten the Indians, and was constantly on the lookout for any signs of them. Whenever he did sight a skulking figure Andy made haste to squeeze the rubber that caused the siren to give tongue. Jose nearly lost his hold the first time he heard that fierce whoop so close to his ear; for of course in his nervous condition he thought that something had burst, and that they were now bound to go tunbling down through all that space to be splashed about below.

But that lasted for only a very brief time, since they speedily reached a point far beyond where any of the fleeing Indians had gone. After that it was plain sailing and they made rapid speed.

Then, after they had covered many miles in this fashion, with the glasses Andy was able

to make out trees ahead, and some sort of ridge that doubtless marked the delimitation of the desert's border.

Nearer and nearer they drew. Jose began to actually consider that he still had something of a chance to live through it all; though the balance of his life he would certainly never be apt to forget what dreadful fears had held him gripped fast in their power when up in a fast-flying aeroplane.

Now the keen-eyed pilot was looking for a likely place to land, and this he discovered close to the trees themselves, where the ground became much firmer, and Jose could immediately get under shelter from the broiling sun.

After coming down from that cool altitude the tremendous heat of the desert was almost overpowering, and both boys were glad to know that they did not have to continue on through it for any great length of time.

So Jose was finally landed. He seemed to be rejoiced to find himself once more on solid ground. True, he would always boast of having been up almost to the clouds, but it is unlikely that any ordinary attraction could tempt him to try it again.

He shook hands with each of the boys when they were ready to once more venture into

unknown space with the aeroplane. Andy was a little dubious about accepting that hand, which he felt pretty sure had not always been free from crime; but then Frank had done it, and he felt that he could not do better than imitate his cousin in such matters.

They had no particular trouble about the new launching; indeed, now that the biplane was free from the weight of Jose, it seemed to mount upward like a bird that has broken loose from its cage.

The last they saw of the Mexican he was waving a hand after them. And Frank felt well satisfied with the morning's work. He believed that not only had they succeeded in rescuing the little girl, but that fortune had allowed them to give a bad man a chance to open his eyes. It might be the means of turning Jose Sandero from his evil ways; and then again the incident was liable to be swallowed up by the demands of his hard life. And probably they would never know.

Once again they were flying boldly across the wide stretch of desert, with its lonely looking cactus plants, and its queer winrows of sand that looked for all the world as though a giant comb had been drawn over the land, leaving it in this peculiar condition.

When, finally, they reached the northern end of the desert, and headed direct for the ranch house, possibly both of the Bird boys were feeling happier that ever before in all their lives. They had accomplished what seemed next door to a miracle, because, had the men in "chaps" chased after Jose, and threatened to take him, there could be no telling what the desperate Mexican might not have done rather than submit.

"Look there, Frank," Andy was saying a little later, "you can see the ranch house as plain as anything from here, and why, if that ain't the boys coming on the tear over yonder!"

Frank, looking, saw that his chum spoke the truth. There could be seen a confused medley of boys and horses. They were whipping their mounts madly, and using both hats and quirts to try and increase their speed.

"That must be Charley Woo among the front ones," Frank remarked, after he had taken a second good look.

"Yes, you can tell him miles off by his white clothes," Andy went on to say, "and he's done himself proud, has Charley, this day. Uncle must be there alongside, and asking more questions, as he tried to get a little more speed out of his mount. And I reckon they've glimpsed

us, Frank, by the way they act. Are we going to land and let them see that Little Sunbeam is safe with us?"

"It would be cruelty to animals not to," replied the pilot, as he started to head gradually toward the earth.

Ten minutes later, and they were surrounded by an eager, excited throng, and when Buckskin, Shorty, and all that lot learned that little Becky had not suffered to any serious extent as a result of her terribly long and wearisome ride, bound on a pony as she had been, they "awoke all creation," as Andy declared, with their exultant whoops.

Nothing would do but that the boys must tell the whole story; and those wild riders fairly held their breath as they listened to the modest account of that most remarkable dash through space, to arrive just in the nick of time—Frank called it the psychological moment, and then had to stop and explain just what he meant by that, before they would let him proceed.

It was the greatest story they had ever heard. They would never have believed such a thing possible, only that they knew Frank and Andy never told yarns, or even stretched a fish story. Besides, there was little Becky ready to corroborate all that had been said.

Mr. Witherspoon insisted upon taking the child on his horse, and thus heading for the ranch, while the boys continued their flight; of course they would arrive at their destination an hour before the ponies could make it, and thus relieve the minds of those who were there.

The round-up was all off for the present. Later on they could make another start, and this time the boys would be along, to witness all that was done, with Andy taking pictures of the various phases of the operation, as long as his roll of films lasted.

But Mr. Witherspoon had learned a lesson, and never again would he leave home without a sufficient guard remaining there at the ranch house to handle any situation that might arise.

He took some of Frank's philosophy, to the effect that he would always after that be prepared for possibilities, since lightning can at times apparently strike out of a clear sky.

The boys' time on the ranch was now getting toward a close; but before they left they had one pleasant surprise that made them feel happy. It was just on the little maid's sixth birthday that a tired Mexican came to the place and asked to see Mr. Witherspoon.

It happened that both boys were with him, and remembering their recent adventure in con-

nection with one such greaser, they eyed the dusty traveler with more or less curiosity. He handed Mr. Witherspoon a packet which he said his master, who was a ranchero down in Chihuahua, Mexico, had ordered him to get there before dark on this particular day.

Opening the packet the ranchman disclosed some beautiful silken garments such as would be apt to set a little girl wild with delight; and also a lovely slender gold necklace with pearls as its ornaments.

When he had glanced at the paper that had come with this gift Mr. Witherspoon smiled, and looked meaningly at the boys.

"Well, all I can say is, that you two boys are next door to wizards. You've actually made an impression on a heart that I calculated was a hard as flint. Here are some presents for our little girl; and on the paper I read in Spanish: "To the little Senorita Rebecca from her unworthy father, on her sixth birthday. May the good God bless her."

And neither of the boys so much as smiled, for they felt that in some fashion that merciful act of Frank's in treating Jose Sandero so generously had borne such fruit as no one would ever have believed possible.

When the time came for them to say goodbye

to Uncle Jethro and the jolly boys on the Double X Ranch, it was hard to do it. And neither Frank nor Andy would ever forget the rousing cheers that burst from the lips of those happy-go-lucky punchers, Buckskin, Waldo Kline, Shorty, Alkali Joe and the rest, not forgetting even Charley Woo, when they saw the last of them at the station.

Of course Frank and Andy reached their home town in safety, and in due time the biplane once more rested in its accustomed hangar back of Frank Bird's home; with the first snow of winter covering the ground, and a frosty tang in the air that was just the opposite of that torrid wave the Bird boys struck when crossing the Arizona desert.

And it is to be hoped that we will have the pleasure of recounting further thrilling adventures that befell these intrepid air pilots in other volumes to succeed this. Meanwhile, having seen them safely through experiences at the cattle ranch, and once more back home before the delayed session of school opened, it only remains for us to say goodbye to the reader and write—

THE END.

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